

THE ARAB HALL INSCRIPTIONS



WHERE TO FIND THE ARABIC INSCRIPTIONS AND THEIR TRANSLATIONS

The Arabic language is held in great esteem by Muslims because it is the language in which the Quran was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. The text of the Quran is sacred to Muslims, and its high status gave rise to an associated respect for all writing. Calligraphy, or the art of beautiful writing (from the Greek kallos – beauty, graphe – writing), has always been applied to a variety of surfaces, not only on paper, but on a range of materials that include ceramic tiles, stone and wood.

The use of calligraphy in architecture is known from the very earliest years of the Muslim era. For instance, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, built in 691, has a magnificent band of Quranic inscriptions written in gold mosaic, running around the entire circumference of the interior. In religious architecture Arabic calligraphy is likely to be a quotation from the Quran, whereas in a domestic building it might be verses of poetry to give protection to those living within its walls.

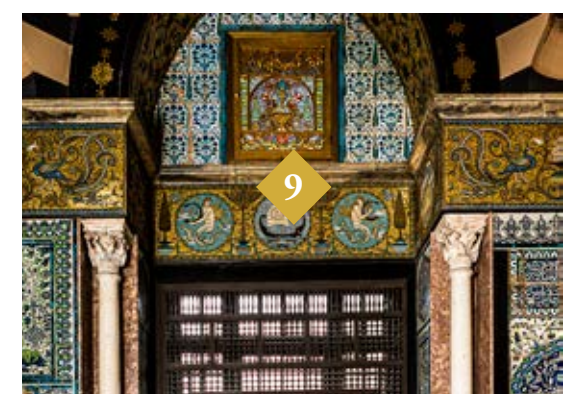
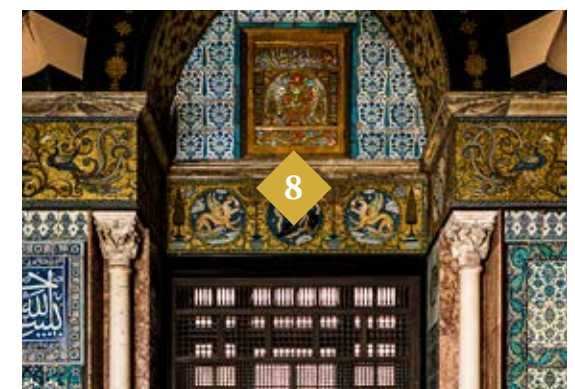
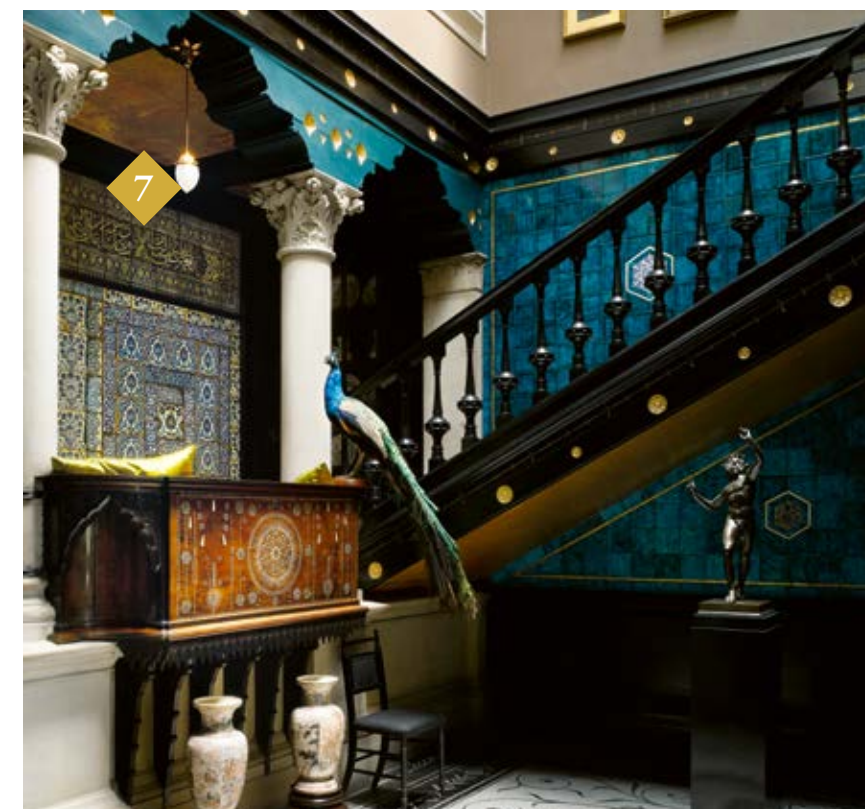
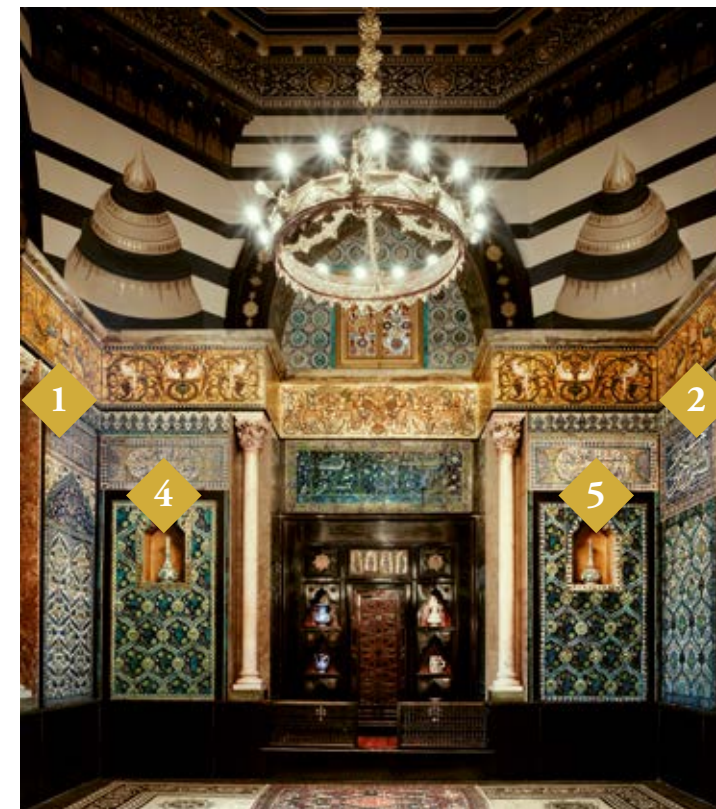
MELANIE GIBSON, 3 MARCH 2020

This research and the translations were conducted by Souad Mohamad from the Al Manaar Muslim Cultural Heritage Centre with the help from the Al Manaar Women's group.

The group visited the museum in Autumn 2019 and became interested in the Arabic writings on the tiles. They wanted to find out if they could translate these writings, link them with quotes from the Quran and other sources and make the translations available to others visiting the Arab Hall.

In the process of researching the writings they added information about the quotes to help to understand them. This booklet is the result of their research. We hope you will find the information useful and interesting.

The project was part of Leighton House Museum's Community Engagement programme supported by the National Heritage Lottery Fund.





Hathihe aldaar 'adha'at bahjaten ==
Watajalat farahan lilnaazirin
Koteba alsaedu alaa 'abwabiha ==
'Adkhuluha bisalam aminin

This residence is radiant with joy /
And cheers those who look at it /
Good fortune is inscribed on its thresholds /
Enter therein, in peace and serenity.

The poem quoted in these tiles was first found in a Tunisian house. It was painted in a panel made from earthenware and has a decorative opaque glaze. The panel was produced in 1805. It is still in place in the same house. It was very common in Tunisia to see this poem painted on the walls of people's homes. The poem could be found in other North African countries with the exception of Morocco.

This phrase is recited before each *surah* (chapter) of the Quran – except for the ninth (*). It is also used by Muslims in various contexts, for example, at the introduction to speeches, at the head of written letters and even before the start of a meal.

(*) *Surah Al-Tawbah* or *Al Bara'ah* talks about fighting, while *Bismillahi ar-Rahmani ar-Rahim* gives peace and mercy. As these two things do not go well together, the ninth chapter starts without *Bismillah*.



Bi-smi llahi r-rahmani r-rahim

In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Compassionate.



La ilaha illallah, Al-Melik,
Al-Haq UI Mubeen.
Muhammadun, rasool Allah,
Sadiqulwa'ad Al Ameen

There is no God but Allah, The King,
The Manifest Truth.
Muhammad is the messenger of Allah,
Sincere to his promise, The Trustworthy.

This supplication is different from the usual *shahada* (the testimony): *Ashadu an la 'ilaha 'illā llāh, (wa) ašhadu 'an(na)muḥammadun rasūlu llāh* (declaring belief in the oneness of God and the acceptance of Muhammad as God's prophet)

The supplication in these tiles does not have the 'I declare' and it has extra phrases after declaring the oneness of God and after declaring Muhammad (PBUH) as the messenger of Allah.

There is a hadith (record of the traditions or sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) which goes like this: "Whoever recites a hundred times every day *la ilaha illallah al-malik al-Haqq al-Mubeen*, it will be a means of safety from poverty for him, he will attract wealth through it, it will be a solace from the desolation of the grave for him, and he will be knocking at the gate of Paradise." Some scholars claim this Hadith is weak i.e. it might not be true.



A'oothu biallah min alshaytan alrajim
Bi-smi llahi r-rahmani r-rahim

I seek refuge with Allah from Satan the accursed,
In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Compassionate.

The two phrases in this panel are to be said when reciting The noble Quran, The first part, about warding off the evil spirit, is encouraged but it is not obligatory, while the second part, the *Bismillah*, is obligatory. This is not the only use of these phrases. Muslims recite the *A'oothu biallah min alshaytan alrajim* whenever they feel they have been tempted by the devil. Even if someone forgot a word while they were speaking which could be considered as Satan making them forget, they recite this phrase to remember the forgotten words. The *Bismillah*'s other use is for example when you want Allah to bless something. These two phrases are repeated daily by Muslims.

Souad says: 'These tiles and the similar ones on the opposite wall are the most disorganised tiles out of the whole collection, some of the tiles are missing and some are misplaced. Although we were able to read some words, it was hard to comprehend what the whole phrase means. It was only when one of us spotted that one of the tiles from the opposite wall was swapped with this side. The tiles in this picture, although they are misarranged, they are actually easy to read, maybe because the phrase is commonly used in daily Arabic. The first two tiles are put in the right order, then the third tile (I marked it with X) belong to the other side, and the tile marked with X on the other side should be placed instead of tile X in this side.



The three lower tiles are also not in the correct order, remember that Arabic writing runs from right to left but the tiles here order are from left to right.'



These tiles should be verse (2:256) but the verse is not complete and the tiles are not in the right order.The Verse should read:

La ikraha fee alddeeni qad tabayyana alrrushdu mina alghayyi faman yakfur bialttaghooti wayumin biAllahi faqadi istamsaka bialAAurwati alwuthqa la infisama laha waAllahu sameeAAun AAaleem.

There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion. The right course has become clear from the wrong. So whoever disbelieves in Taghut and believes in Allah has grasped the most trustworthy handhold with no break in it. And Allah is Hearing and Knowing.

All the tiles up until half of the word 'Taghut' are missing, then the tiles are arranged in backwards order (as numbered). After the tile 4, the tile x should be swapped with the x tile from the opposite wall, the tile 5 is missing which has the word *alwuthqa* (most trustworthy) then the tile 6 which has the word *la infisama* (with no break in it). The rest of the verse is missing. The tile X on the opposite wall has the word *qad tabayyana* (has become clear) which is at the beginning of the verse, before all of these tiles.



Souad says: 'My speculation regarding those two groups of tiles is that they come from one artwork, it make sense because Quranic verses must start with Bismillah but this one hasn't. I think, due to the limited space on the wall, they must have divided them into two groups, and as they wanted them to be symmetrical, they compromised on some of the tiles which led to the meaning of the verse to be distorted. Lastly, those two groups of tiles should swap places because Arabic writing is from right to left so the Bismillah should be on the right and the (2:256) verse should be on the left when you look at them as you entre the Arab Hall.'



SŪRAT AR-RAḤMĀN [55]

Bi-smi llahi r-rahmani r-rahim

Ar Rahmaan (1)

‘Allamal Quran (2)

Khalaqal insaan (3)

‘Allamahul bayaan (4)

Ashshamsu walqamaru bihusbaan (5)

Wannajmu washshajaru yasjudan (6)

THE MOST GRACIOUS [55]

In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Compassionate.

1. The Most Gracious (Allah)

2. He Has taught (you mankind) the Qur’an (by His Mercy)

3. He created man

4. He taught him eloquent speech

5. The sun and the moon run on their fixed courses (exactly)
calculated with measured out stages for each (reckoning)

6. And the herbs (or stars) and the trees both prostrate
themselves (to Allah)

This is by far the easiest part of the Arabic writing to decipher, it is the beginning of a chapter from the Holy Quran (Islam religious text book). The writing is clear, the tiles are in order and there are no missing tiles.

The writing consists of the first six verses of chapter 55, the name of the chapter is the first word in the first verse (after the *Bismillah*).



Ya niemat’llah hillee fi manazilina

Weh jawirina ra’ak Allahu min jaru

Weh astaqbelina bi’ayaamin mubarakatin

Wassaedu yakhdumuna fi hathihe addaaru

O grace of Allah, descend on our homes

And stay with us, bless you for a companion

And welcome us with abundance of blessed days

And good fortune is distributed in this house

This quotation of a poem which was found on the wall of a house of Muhammad Jamaluddin al-Makki al-Amili al-Jezzini, also known as *Shahid Awwal* (The First Martyr) in Jezzine (a town in Lebanon). The tiles on the Leighton House stairs, only contain the first two verses of the poem. The general meaning of the poem is that the owner of the house is asking God to make his life prosperous when living in this house.



Kaf, Ha, Ya, ‘Ayn, Saad Kifayetuna

Our sufficiency



Tabarek hetanuna

Blessed our walls

These two, stained glass windows, contain excerpts from a Sufi citation called *ḥizb al-baḥr* (The sea supplication) by Abul Hasan ash-Shadhili [593 AH/1196 AD – 656 AH/1258 AD] who was an influential Islamic scholar and founder of the Shadhili Sufi order. This supplication and similar ones were meant to ward off evil. Reciting these supplications and remembering God, was to create something like a fortress that has a door, walls and a roof around a person so Satan or any other enemy cannot penetrate it.



Souad Mohamad who conducted this research adds: ‘My conclusion is that Lord Leighton loved his house very much and wanted to show it to the world, that’s why he chose the tiles that have poems welcoming guests, at the same time he wanted to protect it from the evil eye so he chose the protecting verses of Quran and the other various supplications...’

GLOSSARY

Bismillah – a phrase in Arabic meaning “in the name of God”, it is also the first word in the Qur’an, and refers to the Qur’an’s opening phrase.

Shahada – also spelled Shahadah, is an Islamic creed, one of the Five Pillars of Islam, declaring belief in the oneness (tawhid) of God and the acceptance of Muhammad as God’s messenger.

Hadith – record of the traditions or sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, revered and received as a major source of religious law and moral guidance, second only to the authority of the Qur’an, the holy book of Islam.

Surah – is the term for a chapter of the Qur’an. There are 114 surahs in the Qur’an, each divided into Ayahs (verses).

Sufism – is a form of Islamic mysticism that emphasizes introspection and spiritual closeness with God. Sufism is not a sect but could be more accurately described as an aspect or dimension of Islam.

Quran/Koran – literally meaning “the recitation”, is the central religious text of Islam, which Muslims believe to be a revelation from God (Allah).

