Islamic Art
Teacher Seminar in Egypt 2004

A Brief Background of Islamic Art
Lesson Plans: Arabic Script for Grade 7 and Up
Lesson Plans: Geometric Design for Grade 8 and Up
Bibliography

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A Brief Background of Islamic Art

Islamic art flourished from 661 to 1494. Since that time Arabs have continued to influence architecture, calligraphy, textiles, music, woodwork, and metalwork. The art of miniature painting has diminished. Islamic art has developed within a cultural framework according to Islamic aesthetics.

Early Islamic art borrowed from local groups, making these styles their own by incorporating them into styles and motifs that conformed to religious teachings. Thus Islamic art developed its own distinctive styles with the influence of Byzantine, Hellenistic, Coptic, Sassanoid, and Nabatean traditions. As the Empire expanded, Arabs encountered Buddhist and Chinese civilizations along with indigenous artistic traditions of the Berbers, Slavs, Turks, Goths, and various African peoples. From each Muslims chose those aspects that fitted into Islamic beliefs and tastes.

Figurative Painting

"On the Day of Judgment, artists will be asked to recreate their own artistic works, and when they fail to do so, they will be severely punished"

"Those who will be most strictly punished by God on the Day of Judgment will be the painters and sculptors."

These two statements are attributed to the Prophet and carry with them a great deal of power. (The Arab Contributions to Islamic Art, Wijdam Ali, p.14) Imagine an artist considering these statements and seriously altering the nature of his art. Or imagine the disapproval of his fellow Muslims when viewing an artistic contribution that does not conform to the teachings. However, these statements refer to painting and sculpture that were produced for purposes of worship. Consider the destruction of idols in the Kabah. Here paintings and sculpture was removed from a sacred place. Also consider paintings of the Prophet and his followers and how the Prophet’s head is covered in a white cloth. These paintings are revered. Consider further the quantity of figurative painting that has come out of the Persian tradition. The creation of idols to worship is not acceptable; painting and sculpture are.

Leaving figurative painting out of the mosque has opened the possibilities for mosaic work, geometric and floral arabesque, stone and stucco mosaic tessellations, and calligraphy in extensive decoration of the mosques. One cannot enter a mosque, even one of great age and physical decline without being struck by its beauty and its attention to detail in creating a magnificent environment.

Arabesque

The term Arabesque is a European description of the Arabic vegetal scroll. In a land that is so hot and dry or dry and cold, life is very difficult. Needs are pared down to necessities. In such an environment, one can consider a garden to be paradise. Where
there is an abundance of water and many green gardens, life can be a luxury. And paradise is described in the art and architecture of Islam. The palace contains an abundance of water ways flowing to irrigate and to cool. Beautiful plants surround and the sounds of water flowing into a basin or fountain or into a cool place to wash and soothe the body and the mind.

Two motifs exist: geometric and vegetal. Both are abstracted to the point that their origins are barely visible. Patterns seem to have no beginning and no end, and the pattern becomes infinite both its its visual effect and the possibilities that exist for its abstraction. Designs are repetitive and limitless. The viewer’s mind is removed from the chaos of a three-dimensional world into geometric or vegetal order. “By visually entering into an arabesque arrangement, the viewer’s mind is taken out of the real world around it, into a contemplation of eternity of God’s perfections.” (Ali, p. 63)

Early Architecture of the Mosque

Muhammad’s home until his death was in Yathrib, the city later known as Medina. The Medinan surahs reveal the construction of a place to house an uprooted Muslim community, a place of sanctuary. His home was the center of the community. It contained a large courtyard, about fifty meters square, and was surrounded by a mud brick wall. At the south end of the courtyard was a colonnade of palms that supported palm fronds. This portion of the shelter protected the community from the sun when the people were gathered. To the north of the courtyard was a covered area designed to shelter and house the homeless. There was a private area of the house for Muhammad’s family. From the courtyard were gates to the east, north, and west ends. Muhammad would sometimes talk with followers from a seat set above three stairs. The call to prayers came from the rooftop. There was a flat stone slab which gave the direction of prayer. This basic design became the pattern for the early mosques.

The three-step chair became the minbar or the place where the Friday prayers were delivered. The concave mihrab or niche was set in the wall and replaced the stone slab giving orientation to the building and direction of the prayers. The call to prayers came not from the roof top but from the minaret. Palms no longer supported palm fronds, but stone columns and arches support the roof.

Language, The Qu’ran, and Calligraphy

Arabic is a language that would probably have become extinct except for its close association with the Qu’ran. Arabic was in use as early as the fifth century and existed in Muhammad’s time. The Qu’ran has remained timeless and consequently Arabic has remained timeless.

Calligraphy itself began with the Qu’ran. It is the beauty of the words that give value and identify a person. It is not the portrait. Calligraphy is the one Islamic art that has never been influenced by any foreign artistic tradition. It is truly Islamic.
had developed over time and from region to region. Each form has its own distinct characteristics and are best seen rather than described.
Calligram in the form of a horse, Iran, 1266/1849-50: 'Bismillah. While the succession of days and nights continue their piebald course through time, O king, may the face of the earth be under the hoof of your white horse, the shoe on your night-black hoof be the crescent moon of New Year, and this golden constellation of the firmament the ornament of your saddle. Born to palace service, the aged Sayyid Husayn 'Ali executed this calligraphy. 1266.'

'Advance and thou art free', calligraphy by Hassan Massoudy, France, 1950. The line is from the medieval Romance of Antar, the story of a 6th-century Bedouin poet, Antarab b. Shaddad. The mother of the valiant Antarab was a black slave, but at a critical juncture his Arab father gave him this encouragement. Hassan Massoudy was born in Iraq and now lives in Paris. Private Collection.

*Islamic Art, Barbara Brend*
Arabesques on the ceilings of the small rooms in al-Burdayn’s mosque resemble bouquet designs found in ancient Egyptian Theban tomb paintings, but reject the central arkh-shaped staff symbol of life in favor of a seemingly unending maze of leafy vines.

Arabic Writing—Grade 7

Seventh graders study the history of Islam as part of the social studies program. I wanted to participate in the study of Islam by bringing art into the program. I wanted my students to write their names in Arabic.

My seventh graders cycle through the art class, a new group arriving every quarter. Some arrive already having studied Islam. Early in the year they have had no exposure. I introduced Islam through a video tape and through their history text.

**Motivation**

**Video:**

Students watched *Islam: Empire of Faith*, a video that is 180 minutes long and very good. We only watched the first 45 minutes of so of the video. They will learn more in their history classes, and I was interested mostly in some brief exposure in art class. I gave them a worksheet to draw their attention to certain vocabulary words, and I had them take notes on the worksheet. When we finished the first portion of the video, students met with partners and went over their notes, sharing parts that were missing. We talked about the notes as a class. They were most interested in the dress of the people, the look of the desert, and the camels. (See attached.)

**Textbook:**

We found the chapters of their history textbook that contained information about the Islamic Empire. I gave each student three paper markers to use to mark the places that they thought were most interesting. Then we shared the pages of interest, talking about maps, parts that were consistent with the video, etc. They were especially interested in an Islamic classroom where the students sat on pillows on a carpeted floor. Some of the words displayed at the front of the room were written in English. They also noticed that there were no boys in the class and that the girls wore scarves.

**Slide Show:**

I showed them a slide show of pictures that I had taken in Egypt so that they could see several examples of Arabic script.

**Instruction**

Students took notes on the information that I gave them about Arabic Script.

- Arabic writing uses letters that we are probably not familiar with.
- Words are written from right to left.
- Arabic words are made up of three consonants, and vowels are added that slightly change the meaning of the word. For example:

  k t b was our starting place.
  k a t a b to write
  k i t a b a writing
  k i t a b book
As I added letters they guessed what the word might be.

- Arabic is very beautiful.
- Not all of our letters match up with Arabic letters.
- Many words are written without vowels that we would use when we write.
- I showed them how English can be written on three spaces of lined paper. The middle space contains the short letter. Tall letters take up the middle space and the top space. Letters that go below the line take up the middle space and the bottom space.
- We practiced writing English words backwards, and we laughed a lot.

**Procedures**

I gave each student a card with his English name written at the top. Below the name I wrote the name phonetically. Using the three spaces described above, I wrote the name in Arabic. Below the Arabic was written the letters that I used to write their names, only backwards. Students sectioned off their papers so that the lines were grouped to make three spaces. They then practiced copying their names. Eventually they were able to write their names in Arabic without looking at the card. We then switched to drawing paper. During this time students spent a lot of time at my work table getting help and checking to see if they were doing it right.

I showed them a calligram where the Arabic words were written within a shape. Each selected a shape that was already cut out, and traced the shape making their names fit within a circle, oval, pear, square, etc. They adjusted the shapes of the letters to fit the shape of the paper. After much practice and shape changing each finally came up with his or her very pleasing looking name. We then did a final copy with markers on drawing or construction paper.

**Evaluation**

I was very pleased with the results. Students were proud of their work. This was a difficult activity, especially for the beginning of seventh grade when students are still very concerned about doing the right thing. They were up at my table constantly getting help, and some were frustrated. They also felt a lot of success after accomplishing a difficult task. They now all recognize Arabic writing. I will do this again.
## Islam: Empire of Faith

### Vocabulary:
- Mecca
- Allah
- Oasis
- Muslim
- Kabah
- Quran
- Medina

Write about what you see and hear in the video about each category.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Landscape, countryside, towns. What do they look like? How do they dress?</th>
<th>People and society of the Arabian Peninsula. What do they do?</th>
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<tr>
<th>Events in Mohammed’s life. Start with his childhood.</th>
<th>Mohammed and his followers. What happened to them?</th>
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<th>Examples of Arabic script. Where did you see it?</th>
<th>The Quran. What did you learn about it?</th>
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Name ____________________________  Date ________________________  Art Period ______
Geometric Design—Grade 8

Eighth graders have already studied the history of Islam as seventh graders; so we reviewed what they remembered. I told them that we were going to do some art in the style that is seem is Islamic countries.

Motivation

I passed out several pictures that I had taken of artwork while I was in Egypt. They became very curious and asked several questions about the pictures. I drew their attention to pictures that were taken inside a mosque that made use of geometry for decoration.

Procedures

The Grid

There are other configurations where hexagons are nested, but they require more accuracy than eighth graders can produce. The grid that I used here is the 12/24 grid that is drawn on a circle. The tools needed are a compass and a straight edge. There is no measuring involved, purely geometric construction.

I took my students through the six steps that are used to complete a grid. (See attached.) This is a lengthy process, and some students get lost along the way. Several had to start over. Each student had a set of directions for making the grid. Everyone completed a practice grid on manila paper.

Each then made a second grid on clean white paper. This was the grid that we used for the final piece.

The Design

I gave each student a Xerox copy of a paper showing some designs that are used in Islamic art. They were to use the pictures to copy the Islamic work, or to get ideas to do their own design.

The grid is symmetric along six lines; so each portion of the design that is drawn on the grid must be repeated either six or twelve times. I demonstrated several times.

Students were instructed to do the following:

• Make a shape on the grid that has a reason for being there because there are points on the grid that “show” you the shape.
• Repeat the shape all around the grid, placing it twelve times. If the shape is placed six times then it is necessary to skip every other part of the grid.
• Continue placing shapes until you have achieved the desired results.

Students then traced the design with markers. They had to look at the design from the back to see if the design was complete. If not, more design was added.

Coloring the Grid

These designs are often made of metal or wood, so they can be be outlined or colored to look like wood by using brown. Gray or black can be used to show metal. Designs were first outlined in marker, the grid lines erased, and the shapes colored with marker, crayon, or colored pencil. Common color combinations are blues and green, but any analogous colors work well. When coloring a shape, students needed to color all shapes that were the same with the same color.

In Islamic art the finished portion of the style that students did is not isolated. Instead it becomes part of a continuous design.
Evaluation

The student work is outstanding. This is a difficult project, and instructions have to be given step by step and repeated often. There was lots of frustration, but interest was very high. Students who mastered the grid were willing to help others so that everyone was able to do this project. It was worth the effort.
STAGE 1
Draw a circle the size you want and divide it into six using compasses set to the same radius to mark round the circumference. This method is usually more accurate than measuring angles of 60° which is the alternative. Join the opposite points to give three diameters.

STAGE 2
Do not join each point to its neighbours but join it to the three other points. This gives a six pointed star.

STAGE 3
Draw an additional line through each of the intersections to divide the circumference into twelve equal parts.

STAGE 4
Complete the triangles for the six new points as you did with the first six. The result is a twelve pointed star.

STAGE 5
Join each point to its neighbour but two to give the basic twelve point grid which is the starting point for many good Kaleidometric designs.

STAGE 6
Draw six more lines through the centre and the points of intersection to divide the circle into 24 points. With its centre filled in with more 12 pointed stars as on pages 6 and 8 it is known as the 12/24 basic grid and is one of the most useful and fertile grids so far discovered.

Kaleidometrics, Sheila Shaw
Prisse d'Anennes: Islamic Art in Cairo, George T. Scanlon
These examples of inlaid stucco on stone illustrate how spinning motifs found within circles, rectangles, and octagons can be varied. Inverse and reciprocal design patterns are integral to the evolution of Islamic geometric ornamentation.

Stucco inlaid on stone, 16th-18th centuries
Bibliography


