

The Cleveland
Museum of Art

Islamic Art: By
Medium and Motif



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Front cover:
Sampler, 1700s. Morocco.
Embroidered cotton;
48.9 x 87 cm. Educational
Purchase Fund 1929.830

This document accompanies an *Art to Go* lesson. *Art to Go* shares genuine art objects from the Cleveland Museum of Art's distinctive Education Collection with schools, libraries, community centers, adult facilities, and other sites around northeastern Ohio, inspiring and teaching children and adults of all ages.

With supervision and wearing gloves, participants are able to handle actual art objects while engaging in exciting exploration and lively discussion about diverse cultures, time periods, materials, and techniques represented in the works of art in various media including ceramics, textiles, prints, carved wood and stone, and cast metal.

From ancient culture in Egypt, Greece, or Rome, to the art of China or Japan, from the technology of medieval armor, to the traditions of Native American peoples and, customs of early American

The Cleveland Museum of Art gratefully acknowledges the Citizens of Cuyahoga County for their support through Cuyahoga Arts and Culture.



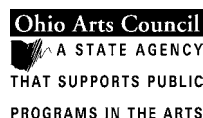
settlers, *Art to Go* offers different suitcase topics that can be adapted for most age groups. Museum staff and trained volunteers specifically select art objects from the suitcases to create individualized presentations.

For a list of available *Art to Go* topics, visit our web site www.clevelandart.org/art-to-go. To enhance the Art to Go experience we invite you to schedule a visit to the world-renowned collections of the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Special thanks to Cleveland Museum of Art Summer 2011 Warshawsky fellow Maggie Murphy (Class of 2012, Bryn Mawr College) for the selection of objects and extensive research that led to this publication. Without your efforts this document would not have been possible!

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The Ohio Arts Council helped fund this program with state tax dollars to encourage economic growth, educational excellence, and cultural enrichment for all Ohioians.



Islamic art differs from other categories of art displayed in our museum's galleries just by nature of its organizing principle, religion, rather than time or geography. Islamic art incorporates art from many different countries (from Spain to Asia) and time periods (from the 600s to the present), and while religion is the organizing principle for Islamic art, most of it is secular. This particular group of objects has been chosen to highlight some key themes in Islamic art.

Islamic art often has a "practical" side. Almost everything found in the Islamic galleries was useful: textiles were worn or used as furnishings; paintings often adorned books; innovative metalworking techniques enriched inkwells and bath pails; and ceramics could be stand-alone functional vessels or exist as tiles adorning buildings. Because the objects were meant to be used, they often reflect aspects of people's daily lives, imparting to them a sense of intimacy not always found in Western art. For instance the fragment from the neck of a water jar (1924.799) is one such humble object from daily life. Its function was to keep particles from contaminating the water, yet the care with which the filter has been created is perhaps unique for an object with such a mundane function.

Islamic art seems to particularly value certain media, such as ceramics or textiles. Islamic potters were masters of ceramic technology, and contributed many innovative techniques to the history of the medium. One example included here illustrates an innovative ceramic technique known as lusterware. It features a shiny gold decoration against a white-ground slip. This delicate process involved applying a thin layer of metal oxide to a clay body covered in white slip. The intent of the white slip was to make the ceramic resemble finer-bodied Chinese porcelains. The shiny gold motif also creates an effect resembling a more intrinsically valuable material. Textiles, while practical in their use as garments or household furnishings, denoted wealth and status in Islamic society, and were particularly beloved. Carpets were perhaps the textiles most favored by Western collectors for centuries, and yet they are just one aspect of a varied body of material. A Moroccan embroidered textile included here (1929.830), a part of a woman's wedding trousseau, is another example of the fine care given to the production of something that could ultimately

be used. Throughout the museum's galleries, whether Islamic textiles are preserved as a fragment holding a holy relic or are depicted as a prominent element in a Western painting, their prevalence attests to their widespread production.

Islamic art often references the written word through its use as a predominant decorative motif. The written word was intrinsically connected to the Koran, the holy book of Islam. Islamic culture had been an oral one, for which writing was not largely practiced until the advent of the Koran and other related religious texts. As written language was used to convey the thoughts, words, and ideas of holy texts, much care was given to its appearance. Beautifully written words, commonly called calligraphy, are often applied to art. Two examples of calligraphy are included here—a page from an illustrated manuscript (1925.545) and an inkwell. Even though they occur in different media, one can compare the two and see that calligraphy took different forms; a more angular, upright script was employed on the inkwell, while a softer, cursive script was used in the text portion of the illuminated manuscript. Calligraphy was incorporated in many forms of Islamic art: for inscriptions on buildings, in textiles, on glassware, ceramics, and metalwork, and is therefore considered a hallmark of Islamic art.

The survey found here is not meant to be exhaustive or comprehensive. We feel that art can be a window in time, geography, and culture, and thus hopefully awaken a desire in the viewer to learn more about Islamic culture. Among the many pleasures art can inspire is to foster greater cultural understanding, surely a boon in today's multicultural and multifaceted society.

Medium: Ceramics

This simple unglazed ceramic is a fragment of a filter from the neck of a water jar. Egypt's arid dusty climate offered a threat of dust, dirt, or bugs that could taint water; these water jug filters solved these potential problems. The unglazed ceramic medium allowed condensation on the surface, which helped to cool the contents. Artists carved two animal figures in this filter, probably gazelles or hares. Their ears are so highly stylized, however, it is difficult to identify them. Game animals such as gazelles or hares often appear as a motif in Islamic art, particularly as they related to hunting.

This was made in Fustat, the early capital of Egypt (Cairo became the capital in 969). Fustat was a major trading center at the time. Now there is very little left in the deserted city a few miles outside Cairo. Many ceramic fragments were excavated in Fustat, testifying to its importance as a center of ceramic production as well.



Fragment from a Water Jar,
1100s. Egypt, Fustat. Un-
glazed ceramic; 7 x 7 x 4.5
cm. Educational Purchase
Fund 1924.799

Fragment of a Bowl,
900s–1000s. Egypt,
Fustat. Hispano-Moresque
ware. Glazed ceramic;
3.8 x 10.2 x 8 cm.
Educational Purchase
Fund 1924.783



This ceramic fragment features decoration in shiny gold, achieved through a process called lusterware, where metallic oxides are painted on before a second firing, which then adhere to the surface of the clay body as a shiny film. This two-step process—a true technological innovation in its day—was done to make a humbler material appear more opulent. It is said that necessity is the mother of invention; this fragment reflects the need of Muslim artists to respect their faith’s mandate of humility by specifically choosing lesser metals and materials. Notice too that the clay body (which can be seen on the side of the fragment) is a darker color than the white slip on the surface, which was done to make the rougher clay body appear more refined.

Most lusterware ceramics are decorated with motifs of plants, animals, or scrolls. Many of these designs were Sassanian in origin. The Sassanians were a pre-Islamic Persian empire contemporary to ancient Rome. This particular fragment dates to the 1100s and was probably produced in Fustat, Egypt.

Tilework has adorned Islam’s most important works of architecture since its beginnings; an example is the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (built 687–92). At the Dome of the Rock, minute tesserae—squares of glass and stone—form complex patterns on the interior walls. The technique was inherited from Byzantium, but the execution of motifs was purely Islamic. Muslims decorated their buildings with tiles from the 1100s on, in many variations, each time making it more uniquely their own. By the time the Ottomans were the major power in the Islamic world (1500s), their tilework consisted of square ceramic tiles with blue motifs against a white background. This

one, in addition to the use of blue, features a deep red color derived from an iron-rich slip that was developed around 1550.

We saw in the last example of glazed ceramic (the lusterware fragment) that the Islamic aesthetic preference was for a colored motif against a white background. Here, the white background comes from the body of the clay itself (technologically superior to the earlier use of a white slip), the “clay” being a compound of ground silica, some white clay, and a combination of glass and metal called frit. The colors are added through a technique called underglazing, as they are underneath a clear glaze. The technique is found among contemporary Chinese ceramics—not surprising as Islamic ceramics are often inspired by Chinese examples. But the motifs—the long, sharp-leaved *saz* motif and tulips—are purely Ottoman. Iznik, in western Turkey, was the center for production of Ottoman ceramics and the location where this tile was produced.

For a completely different approach to tilework, compare this to the *Mihrab* (1962.23), made with small pieces of cut tile to create elaborate patterns, at the entrance to gallery 116.

Tile with Carnations and Tulips, late 1500s.
Turkey, Iznik? Rhodian ware. Glazed earthenware; Diameter: 17.8 cm.
Educational Purchase Fund 1921.107



Medium: Textiles

Textiles have a place of importance in Islamic culture. From the earliest times high-status individuals have either worn or used intricately patterned silks to denote status and luxury. Nomadic Islamic peoples used patterned textiles for tents and lined the floors with carpets; mosque and palace floors were always adorned with carpets. Among the Moroccan people of the 1800s, intricately embroidered textiles like the reversible cross-stitch, or Fez stitch example here, were labors of love created by women to enhance their wedding trousseau. The intricacy of the stitching is apparent when comparing the front and the back; they are the same. This precise embroidery technique was imparted to girls under the tutelage of a female master.

People in Morocco, especially in the capital of Fez, still view textiles as a necessary part of their lives both culturally and logistically. Brides and grooms often adorn their wedding clothes with local high quality textiles even if they wear mostly Western dress. Today, Fez stitch embroidery is too time consuming and therefore costly to produce. Computerized looms take the place of these handcrafts and attempt to mimic popular embroidery designs.

Sampler, 1700s. Morocco.
Embroidered cotton;
48.9 x 87 cm. Educational
Purchase Fund 1929.830



Miniature with Male
Figures in a Tent, about
1500s. Persia (Iran). 22.2 x
13.3 cm. Educational
Purchase Fund 1925.545



Motifs: Calligraphy

This Iranian painting, a work from an illustrated manuscript of the 1500s, depicts a prince seated in a tent, with three other figures gesturing to him. A common misconception about Islamic art is that it is non-figurative, yet narratives are clearly a part of illustrated literature of the time, as seen here. In fact, Iranian literature was full of poetry and tales about historic kings. This page may have illustrated such a text.

The illustration is accompanied by calligraphic writing, here in the *thuluth* script. Beautiful writing—calligraphy—is the pre-eminent art form of Islamic culture. Almost since the dawn of Islam, calligraphers believed that by copying the word of God they would experience God’s blessings. These notions trickled down to secular arts and poetry. Iran especially contains a rich history of poetry and literature. The school that produced this work, known as the Isfahan school,

flourished under the rule of the Safavids, rulers of Iran from 1502–1722. The best examples of calligraphy, however, served religious aims, such as in Korans or inscriptions on religious buildings.

This object pairs nicely with the manuscript page, as it once contained ink that an author may have used for his writing. Made of brass in Iran in the 1500s, it too is decorated with calligraphy in *kufic* and *nashki* scripts. The inscriptions found here denote names and may also offer religious verse or legal wisdom, which suggests that they were not only used by authors. According to inscriptions on countless inkwells, they were often used in courts of law or belonged to a ruler. Judges and magistrates obviously needed writing implements to conduct trials. From the inscriptions, art historians infer that sultans might have given inkwells as gifts to their advisors. As a part of this practice, they would often create a new lid and adorn it with an inscription of the new owner's name. If you look carefully at the inkwell from top to bottom, you will see that there is a slight difference in color between the body and the lid. Although this discrepancy might be a product of cleaning, the script on the lid, which appears to be a name, is more angular or jagged than the inscriptions on the body. The palmette shapes are also completely different. Holes on the front of the object suggest that this clasp is a later replacement. This inkwell is from Safavid Iran, and probably dates from the 1400s–1500s. From the difference in colors and style in addition to the name on the lid, we may hypothesize that this inkwell was indeed a secular gift from a ruler to an advisor, where the lid had been changed at some point to include its new owner's name.

The richly decorated surface shows that even humbler metals were given much artistic attention. This was partly out of necessity—Islam suggests people should reject excessive wealth to promote a simpler life. This inkwell has some very general stylistic similarities to the *Wade Cup* (1948.485) in that the brass vessel's surface lends itself to inlay with silver or gold, even though this particular inkwell shows no signs of ever being inlaid.



Inkwell, 1400s–1500s. Iran. Brass; 10.8 x 9.5 cm. Gift of the John Huntington Art and Polytechnic Trust 1915.598

List of objects

Fragment from a Water Jar, 1100s. Egypt, Fustat. Unglazed ceramic; 7 x 7 x 4.5 cm. Educational Purchase Fund 1924.799

Fragment of a Bowl, 900s–1000s. Egypt, Fustat. Hispano-Moresque ware. Glazed ceramic; 3.8 x 10.2 x 8 cm. Educational Purchase Fund 1924.783

Tile with Carnations and Tulips, late 1500s. Turkey, Iznik? Rhodian ware. Glazed earthenware; Diameter: 17.8 cm. Educational Purchase Fund 1921.107

Sampler, 1700s. Morocco. Embroidered cotton; 87 x 48.9 cm. Educational Purchase Fund 1929.830

Miniature with Male Figures in a Tent, about 1500s. Persia (Iran). 22.2 x 13.3 cm. Educational Purchase Fund 1925.545

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