II. Islamic Art and Architecture

At a Glance
The most important ideas for you are:
- Islamic art refers to both sacred and secular works made in Islamic cultures or those they influenced.
- Islamic art is highly decorative and emphasizes the two-dimensional quality of its surfaces.
- Public Islamic sacred art does not depict human figures or animals.
- Calligraphy and manuscript illustration are essential artistic expressions of Islamic culture.
- Domes and minarets are important features of Islamic architecture.

What Teachers Need to Know

Background
Note: The descriptions and activities in the main text below are intended to help you become familiar with the artworks before presenting them to students; however, some of the activities might be adapted for classroom use. Activities intended specifically for students can be found in the Teaching Idea sidebars. The Looking Questions are also printed on the reverse side of the Art Resources and have been written with students in mind so that they might be used as a rough plan for class discussion. You should feel free to use these questions or develop questions of your own. Be sure students have time to look at the reproductions carefully before asking the Looking Questions.

The study of Islamic art offers a perfect opportunity to examine Islam's contributions to culture (for instance, the introduction of the pointed arch), history (for example, the translation and preservation of ancient Greek and Roman writings), and mathematics (such as the introduction of Arabic numerals). As you move through this section, help students understand how Islamic artworks embody and reflect information about Islamic ideas, beliefs, and society.

Characteristics of Islamic Art

Take a look at the included reproduction of the illuminated manuscript Layla and Majnun at School. What immediately strikes you about this work? The color, abundant design, inclusion of writing in the form of calligraphy? How about the architectural references? This small piece exemplifies many of the most important characteristics of Islamic art. The term Islamic art describes both the pieces created specifically in the service of the religion of Islam as well as secular art produced in the lands it influenced.

The prophet Muhammad began spreading the religion of Islam in the early 7th century CE. Muslims believe that Allah [ah-LAH] (the Arabic word for God) made his divine revelations to the prophet Muhammad (c. 570–632 CE) around 610 CE. These revelations were then written down, becoming the Qur'an [kuh-RAN], the holy book that describes Islamic faith, practice, and law.
Because the written word has long been associated with the Qur'an, calligraphy—elegant handwriting—became the supreme element of Islamic art. Calligraphy is very important to Islamic culture; it appears in secular art, as well.

Artists included calligraphy on secular works such as metalwork, pottery, stone, glassware, and palace architecture (see the discussion and Looking Questions for the Court of the Lions in the Alhambra Palace on pp. 264–265).

Reexamine Layla and Majnun at School. Do the figures or the designs dominate the scene? Figures appear in this secular work, but they would not appear in public religious art because the Qur’an forbids idolatry, or the worship of images. As a result, purely decorative elements prevail in Islamic religious art, often filling virtually every available space. These decorative elements appear in secular works as well. The curvilinear, ornate interweaving of abstract shapes and floral and vegetal imagery (as seen in Layla and Majnun at School and along the walls of the Alhambra) is called arabesque—meaning "in the Arab style."

Islamic reliance on pattern and design heightens the flat quality of two-dimensional surfaces. Islamic paintings, furthermore, do not employ the illusionist, single-point perspective that is typical in Western art. Instead, a figure's size commonly denotes its importance, as evident in Layla and Majnun at School. Notice the large teacher in the white turban. He sits on top of the red-bordered, black rug. Even though we know that the carpet lies flat on the floor, it simultaneously appears to be an extension of the back wall.

Islamic representational painting plays with the idea of space in other ways. The illuminator has shown us the inside, outside, and rooftop of the building. We see consecutive events happening simultaneously in different spaces, and this tells a narrative story of both time and space.

Islamic artistic expressions are not limited to architecture and miniatures, but also include rugs, textiles, metalware, pottery, glassware, carved wood (doors, panels, ceilings, etc.), and stucco (highly decorative molded plaster applied to walls and arches). The decorations applied to these objects show a love of materials and an elegance of design.

Opulent color is another common characteristic of Islamic art. Gold shimmers on manuscript pages. Stucco, textiles, ceramics, metalwork, stone, and glasswork are all visually splendid. Royal patrons paid for the expensive materials—and the sacred and secular art they commissioned in turn reflected their wealth, status, and prestige.

Islamic rulers also built mosques, paying for their construction, furnishings, and decorations. Religious buildings served the spiritual needs of the community and also functioned as headquarters for educational and charitable institutions.

Domes, minarets, and pointed arches are among the most prominent features of Islamic architecture. The miniaturist even depicted two of these elements in Layla and Majnun at School. Locate the blue dome and also the pointed arch created where the white and blue floral patterns meet in the central background—right over the main action of the composition. Now examine the luminous gold dome in the included reproduction of the Dome of the Rock. (See the discussion and Looking Questions on pp. 263–264 for more information.) The dome reflects the piety of the master builders Rija ibn Haya and Yazid ibn Salim, who spent all their wealth on the monument. You'll also find pointed arches in the included reproduction of the Court of the Lions in the Alhambra Palace. (See the discussion and Looking Questions on pp. 264–265 for more information.)
II. Islamic Art and Architecture

Teaching Idea
To locate more pictures of Islamic art, do an Internet search for “minarets” and other keywords from this section.

Teaching Idea
Islamic miniatures are full of detail. Before discussing the included reproduction of Layla and Majnun at School, have students study it carefully and then use their observations of the figures’ interaction and the details of the location to inspire a story based on the scene. Afterward, have students share their compositions and identify the similarities and differences in their stories and the details they observed.

The third element of Islamic architecture is the minaret. Minarets are slender towers from which a muezzin [moo-EH-zuhn] (crier) on a balcony beckons the faithful to pray five times a day. The Taj Mahal has splendid minarets and domes. This impressive, pure white-marble building in Agra, India, is not a mosque, but a tomb, built in honor of and named for Mumtaz Mahal, the favorite wife of the Muslim emperor Shah Jahan. Minarets anchor this elegant architectural testimony of love, which took over 20,000 workers approximately 20 years to complete.

Islamic architecture thrived not only in mosques and madrasahs (religious colleges), but in secular buildings as well, such as palaces (see the discussion and Looking Questions for the Court of the Lions in the Alhambra Palace on pp. 264–265), khans (inns), hospitals, and sooks (bazaars).

Layla and Majnun at School (16th century, Safavid Period)

Islamic artists excelled at book illustration. Here we find the widely popular romantic Islamic story of Layla and Majnun, which tells of the soul's search for God and has inspired countless poems, legends, and epics. School plays a pivotal role in the tale because it is here that, at the tender age of 10, the hero, Majnun, meets his beloved, Layla.

As is typical in Islamic painting, the artist presents multiple spaces and perspectives simultaneously. The artist shows indoors and outdoors side by side; sometimes we seem to be looking down (for example, at the figures on the rug), and sometimes we seem to be looking up (for example, at the figure on the roof calling the faithful to prayer). These perspectives combine into a kaleidoscopic composition. Calligraphy fills the rectangle over the white arch-like shape and runs along the bottom border. Decorative elements, calligraphy, and people fill every available millimeter of space. The resulting work is densely packed with visual information that takes considerable observation time to reveal all its complexity.

Looking questions
Note: Cover up the title on the front of the print before showing to students.

- What are the different figures doing? *The figures are reading and writing calligraphy. The figures to the left are playing ball.*
- Based on the figures’ actions, what kind of buildings do you think the artist has depicted? *The artist has depicted a school. Have students point out clues that this is a school.*
- What Islamic architectural element appears on the building roof? *The roof of the building is a dome.*
- What do you think the man on the roof is doing? *He might be calling students to school or calling people to prayer.*
The Dome of the Rock (c. 688–691 CE)

The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem is the oldest complete example of Islamic architecture that is still standing. It was built as a shrine to mark the place from which Muslims believe that Muhammad ascended into heaven on his “Night Journey,” and it is also where they believe the Last Judgment will occur. Jews and Christians revere this sacred ground as the site upon which King Solomon built a temple to Yahweh to commemorate Abraham's sacrifice and to house the Ark of the Covenant between the Jewish people and God.

Abd al-Malik, a member of the first Muslim dynasty, had the shrine built between 688 and 691 CE. Islam was still a nascent religion at the time, and the Arabs were in the process of a military conquest that took them from the Arabian Peninsula into Persia, North Africa, and western Europe. Before the Muslim expansion, Jerusalem had been part of the Byzantine Empire and had attracted a great number of Christian pilgrims. The city was full of monuments to the Christian faith, including the impressive Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Chapel of Ascension. For this reason, Abd al-Malik sought not only to mark Jerusalem as a Muslim holy place, but also to build a lasting monument for his faith. By picking a site with religious significance for Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike, Abd al-Malik ensured that the Dome of the Rock both celebrates the common heritage of these religions and asserts the primacy of Islam.

For Muslims, the Dome of the Rock (also known as the Mosque of Omar) marks the site where the prophet Muhammad ascended to the heavens to receive Allah's instructions, which Muhammad then delivered to his followers upon his return to earth.

The shrine consists of an octagonal structure built on top of an elevated platform. Within this structure, 12 columns and four piers support a cylindrical drum upon which rest two enormous domes, an internal spherical dome of wood, and an external elliptical dome covered with gilded aluminum. Each side of the octagon measures about 66 feet (20 meters), and the top of the elliptical dome is 149 feet (45 meters) high. The plan of the shrine echoes that of several early churches, such as the Church of St. Costanza in Rome, the Church of San Vitale in Ravenna, and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. However, the elliptical dome was unique to Muslim architecture.

The monument is filled with rich symbolism. Its glittering dome (of wood, originally overlaid with lead and gilding) thrusts upward, representing heaven, Allah's realm. Porcelain tiles today replace the original glass mosaic facing, whose beauty indicated the magnificence of God's earth.

The Dome of the Rock today is a shrine for pilgrims. There is a mosque adjacent to it for prayers. Slender minarets are an essential element in Islamic architecture and appear on mosques and many other Muslim religious buildings. The prophet Muhammad's compound in Medina was the first place Muslims gathered for prayer. His compound, with an enclosed courtyard, a building at one end for prayer, and arcades on the sides, became the model for all mosques.

Looking questions

• What things catch your eye about this building? The gold dome is quite striking, as is the enormous entrance.
II. Islamic Art and Architecture

- What does the gold tell you about the building? *The expensive materials used in this building show that it is important.*

- This building is a mosque, a place of worship like a church or temple. How does the top half of the mosque contrast with the bottom half? *The bottom half of the mosque is more decorative and has flat sides, which create an octagonal form. The dome is round—a hemisphere on top of the vertical lines.*

- Why are the materials used in this building especially appropriate for a desert climate? *The sun reflects off the gold dome.*

- Which parts of this building are symmetrical? Can you find any parts that are not? *The building is mostly symmetrical, though some of the wall decoration is not.*

**Court of the Lions, the Alhambra Palace (mid-14th century)**

The Alhambra was the largest of the great alcazars, or fortresses, that the Moors built in Spain. Its history, like that of most of medieval Spain, is complex and often difficult to unravel. Indirectly, it began with the Moorish invasion from North Africa in the 7th century CE. By 732 CE, these adherents of Islam had conquered Spain and reached Poitiers in southern France. Here, they were met and defeated by an army of Christian defenders led by Charles Martel. For the next 700 years, Christians and Muslims fought for control of the Iberian Peninsula. The Muslims, handicapped by internal strife and intrigue, as well as external pressures from the Moors in North Africa and the Christians in the north, began to give way in 976 CE.

Granada, the city in southern Spain where the Alhambra was built, was not much more than a village in the early days of Muslim dominion. By 1025 CE, however, it had grown enough to attract the attention of the Zirids, Muslim Berber kings of one part of Muslim Spain, who began building fortifications on the site of what later became the Alhambra. It has also been suggested that the famous stone lions that are now part of the magnificent Court of the Lions were built at this time.

The Alhambra consists of a vast fortified enclosure, within which an alcazaba (military fortress with barracks, stables, etc.), a palace area, and a craftworker’s quarter are situated. The entire complex includes a dazzling array of domes, courts, vaults, columns, galleries, and gardens. The perimeter of the enclosure measures some 7,218 feet (2,200 meters), and is studded with no fewer than 22 towers of various shapes and sizes. The beautifully constructed palace area includes three main sections, the Mexuar (believed to be where the royal court met), the Palacio de Comares (built around a splendid rectangular pool), and the Palacio de los Leones (which surrounds a courtyard with a fountain supported by carved stone lions).

Much of the palace area is decorated with geometric patterns and poetic calligraphy rendered in stucco, tile, or wood paneling. This ornamentation is often quite intricate and detailed. For example, 8,017 pieces of different-colored woods were used in the decoration of one room alone, the Hall of Ambassadors. In some places, the interior design of the Alhambra reflects the influence of...