

The Qur'an and Islamic Art

Objectives

As a result of this lesson, students will be able to:

- explain how the Qur'anic prohibition of idolatry affects Islamic art.
 - define basic terms - Qur'an, *tawhid*, shirk, idolatry, Arabic, calligraphy, calligram
 - use the calligram form to express an idea or image for themselves
 - analyze how the Qur'an and Muslim culture have had impact upon the forms, techniques, and purposes of artistic work; explain the historical, cultural, and social context of representative works of Muslim calligraphy, e.g. a sultan's seal, a contemporary calligram, a verse of the Qur'an, the name of Allah. (Meets PA Standards for the Arts and Humanities 9.2 A, C, E)
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Materials

Student Handout: **Art and the Qur'an**

Key Questions

- What is the Qur'an?
 - How does it influence Muslim culture?
 - What does it have to say about images?
 - How does this affect artists?
 - How have Muslim artists learned to express themselves while remaining true to their faith?
 - How has the development of calligraphy affected the decorative arts?
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Sources

Suggested Readings

- Annemarie Schimmel. *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture*
- Abdelkebir Khatibi and Mohammed Sijelmassi Hudson. *The Splendour of Islamic Calligraphy*

Websites

- There are many images of Islamic calligraphy to be found on-line with a simple Google search.
 - The Wikipedia entry under Islamic Calligraphy is substantial and contains an animated *tughra* explaining the writing.
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Activities

1. Begin by exploring the idea of “image” – how could you describe someone you love if you could not show a picture?
 2. Ask what students know about Islam, Muslim culture, the Qur’an.
 3. Explain the prohibition of idolatry as basic to Islam, OR provide some Qur’anic passages – 21: 52-54 and 42: 11, which speak of idolatry
 4. Explore how artists might express their creativity in ways that are not images
 5. Show examples of Islamic calligraphy and calligrams, explaining their historical and cultural, and social settings
 6. Assist students in analysis of the impact of the Qur’an on the forms, techniques, and purposes of these works
 7. Ask students to think of examples of calligrams in our culture today
 8. Provide students with materials to experiment and develop their own calligrams in English
 9. Have students share their experience of the process and their results
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Art and the Qur'an

Inquiry Statement

How does art develop in a culture where image is idolatry?

Background

Foundational to an understanding of Muslim culture is an appreciation of the central role of the Qur'an in shaping and regulating all aspects of human life. Central to the Qur'an is the revelation of Tawhid, the single and utterly transcendent nature of God. This understanding of God, as one and totally other, means that devout Muslims never associate anything with God or with devotion to him, for do so would be to commit shirk – idolatry. Because this prohibition of idolatry affects all of Muslim life, the utilization and appreciation of image-based expression common in the West is not open to artists of the Muslim world. Muslim artists must find other means of expression.

The revelation of the Qur'an in spoken Arabic and its subsequent preservation in Arabic script has given the written Arabic language a place of great respect in Muslim culture, allowing it to become the focus of great artistic endeavor in the field of calligraphy. Beautiful writing is a way of expressing and encouraging devotion without the risk of idolatry. As Islamic art continued to develop, calligraphy became a means of decoration not only in mosques but also in secular architecture, in homes, even on furniture and household objects.

As artists continued to lavish their creative energy on this means of expression they developed an art form called the calligram. This is a way of shaping the letters of a word or saying so that when seen together they form an outline related to what is indicated by the word or saying. This could be simple forms, such as the word for bird in the shape of a bird, or more complex forms. Since images of rulers are forbidden on coins or documents, during Ottoman times (1453-1924) each sultan had a seal devised, called a *tughra*, which was his name and brief motto in beautiful Arabic script – something like a logo in today's commercial culture.
