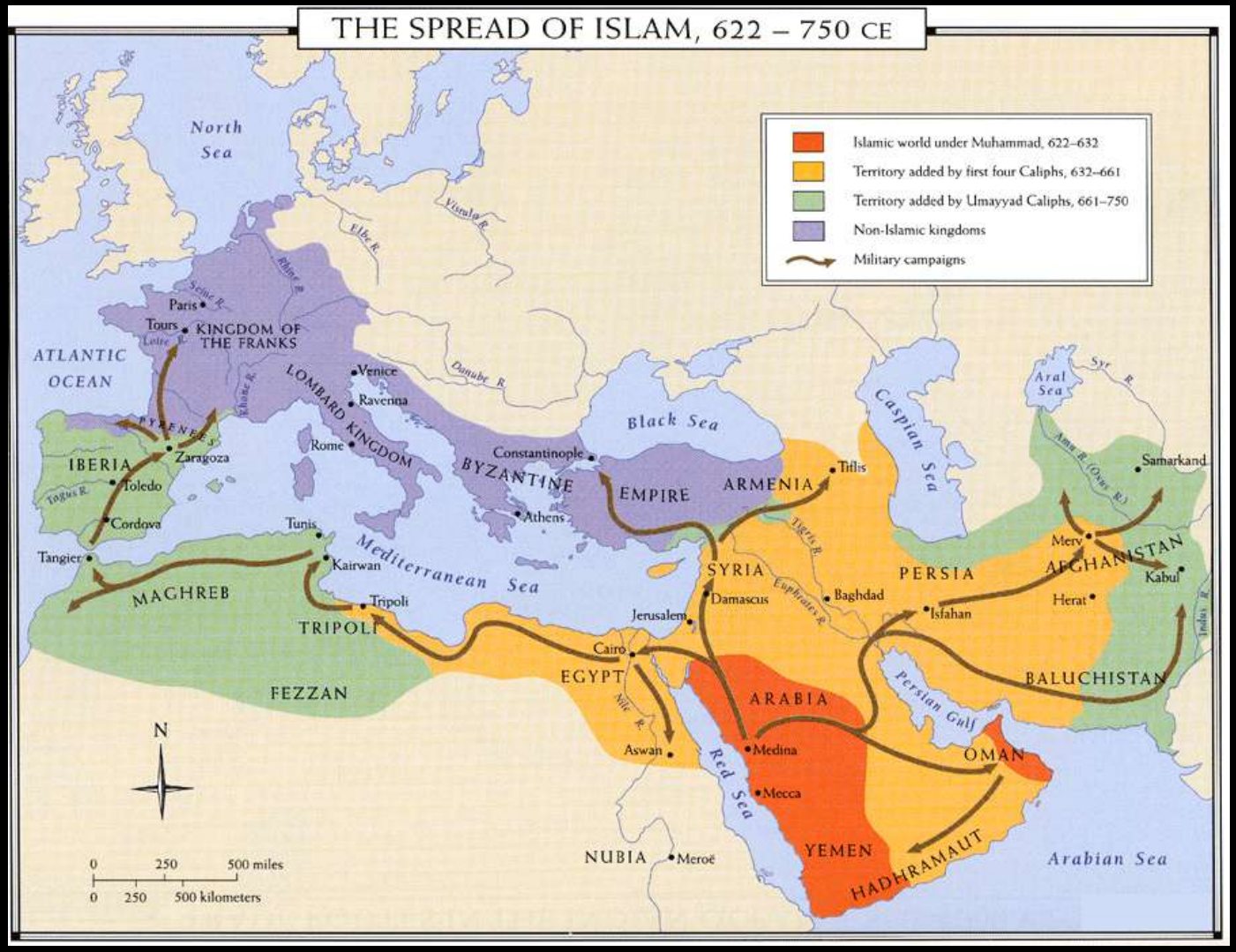
Unit 8 Islamic Art



The art of early Islam is placed here in the sequence of the course because this final faith “of the book” (with Judaism and Christianity) developed within an artistic context that includes, among other sources, Early Christian and Byzantine influences. Three initial points about Islamic art:

1. It makes us reflect upon the strengths and weaknesses of labels. Labels define but also exclude. In this case, should we call Islamic art Western, Beyond-the-West (non-Western), or both. Why? Remember, people and cultures can be more than one thing, one label. Studying Islamic art in the West should make us stop and reflect upon how categorization is not value-free. Whether we're aware of it or not, labels contain values. This issue will matter for the AP examination when you get to one of the long essay questions. Global Islam is not considered Western art for the exam, but should it? Why or why not? These aren't easy questions to answer. Go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art website and see the name of the Islamic Collection: As of November 2011, the new name for the collection is the:

   New Galleries for the Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia.

   http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2011/new-galleries-for-the-art-of-the-arab-lands-turkey-iran-central-asia-and-later-south-asia

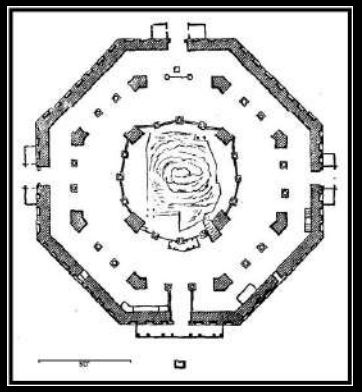
Fig. 2 Gros, Napoleon in the Plague House at Jaffa.

2. Part of this course is critical thinking, questioning the underlying assumptions, biases, and positions we hold when conducting research. Should we continue to call the Great Mosque in Cordoba a mosque or not. Some Catholics in Spain argue that the building is no longer a mosque (remember that the Great Mosque itself appropriated elements from early buildings, including Christian). Furthermore, we should try and reflect upon the sources of our knowledge about different cultures. For example, how much of our knowledge of the classical past is filtered through the Italian Renaissance. In the case of Islamic art, "Orientalism" is a term used in scholarship to study Western cultures' projections of meanings upon Islam. (See Fig. 2) Knowledge of the distant, "exotic" east was often fabricated, the fantasies of the "enlightened" West constructing a largely false reality in the absence of much information. Look at Gros's Napoleon in the Plague House at Jaffe (modern Haifa). He created an accurate architectural setting. We're in the hypostyle hall (prayer hall), looking out at the sahn and the minaret. Overhead you see horseshoe arches with alternating voussoirs (see Cordoba) and pointed arches. But the light is cast on the power and wisdom of the west. The exotic, sublime, mysterious east is cast into shadows.

3. Islamic art is more than religious art. It is also the art and architecture produced within an Islamic cultural context.

As you read the chapter on Islam in your text, consider the five basic themes raised by Stokstad (page 261):

1. Discover Islamic art's eclecticism and embrace of other cultures.
2. Compare and contrast the variety of art and architecture in the disparate areas of the Islamic world.
3. Interpret art as a reflection of both religion and secular society.
4. Explore the use of ornament and inscription in Islamic art.
5. Recognize the role of trade routes and political ties in the creation of Islamic artistic unity.



Figs. 3, 4, 5 Dome of the Rock exterior, Dome of the Rock plan, Dome of the Rock interior.
All five of these points may be found in a single work, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.
Let's take the first point: eclecticism and the embrace of other cultures. The plan recalls martyria and other centralized plan types from the Early Christian and Byzantine worlds. It is a building growing from its historical roots. Look at the interior; it should remind you of works such as the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia. Note the central space with an ambulatory, arcades springing from colonnades, mosaics dissolving the solid surfaces, and a central dome.

Let’s take the second point: the variety of Islamic art as found in disparate parts of the world. Later in the course we’ll look at monuments such as the Taj Mahal in Agra, India. While they share a similarities (especially an interest in abstract designs from nature), they are radically different expressions of Islamic art. Islamic art shows remarkable flexibility with a particular language of forms.

Let’s take the third point: art as a reflection of both the religious and secular worlds. The Dome of the Rock is both an expression of faith and politics. As we’ll see, the same can be such for much religious art around the world. In terms of faith, the building marks the spot of the third great pilgrimage site in Islam. This famous stone, with its Jewish and Christian associations, also marks the spot from which Muslims believe Muhammad ascended on his Night Journey. At the same time, this building proclaims Islam as “completing the prophesies of those faiths and superseding them” (Stokstad, 266).

Let’s take the fourth point: the use of ornament and inscription. Islamic art is known for its amazingly complex ornamentation comprised of both abstract designs and the written word. The Dome of the Rock contains on its walls some of the oldest surviving Qur’anic inscriptions. The interior view shows how Islamic artists celebrated the natural world by abstracting vines with both mathematical and organic beauty. They are as much as a celebration of learning as they are of the beauty of the world.

The final point: recognizing the role of trade routes and political ties in the creating an art form that is widely dispersed around the globe. As you look at other Islamic buildings in the book, what do they share? Elements found in the Dome of the Rock, Islam's first great architectural monument, continue to be found in buildings from both the western and eastern expansions of the faith: the importance of siting, an emphasis on inscriptions (the written word), and the beauty and intellectual mathematical complexity and precision of ornament. The Metropolitan Museum's website succinctly states that:

"With its geographic spread and long history, Islamic art was inevitably subject to a wide range of regional and even national styles and influences as well as changes within the various periods of its development. It is all the more remarkable then that, even under these circumstances, Islamic art has always retained its intrinsic quality and unique identity. Just as the religion of Islam embodies a way of life and serves as a cohesive force among ethnically and culturally diverse peoples, the art produced by and for Muslim societies has basic identifying and unifying characteristics. Perhaps the most salient of these is the predilection for all-over surface decoration. The four basic components of Islamic ornament are calligraphy, vegetal patterns, geometric patterns, and figural representation.

http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/orna/hd_orna.htm

Mosques

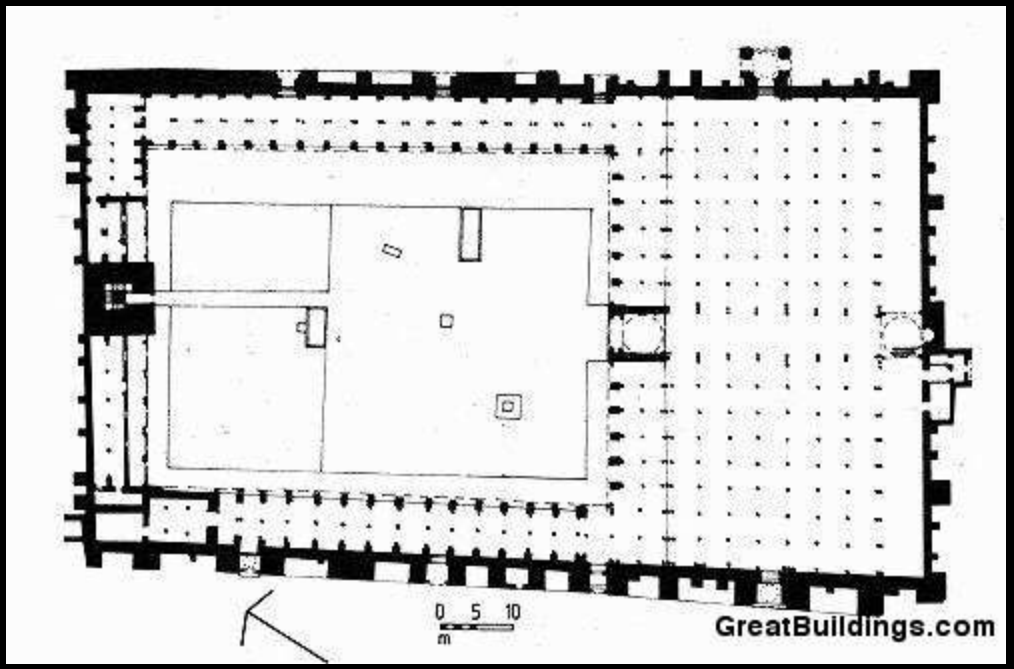


Image: Figs. 6,7 Great Mosque of Kairouan in Tunisia Plan of Mosque

As mentioned previously, the essential question for sacred sites is this: how does the building accommodate the needs of the faithful. What does a synagogue need for the faithful? What does a Christian church need? What does a mosque need for the faithful? For example, many churches are longitudinal for movement during the mass and the ability to see the high altar. On the other hand, those praying in a mosque do not move. So there's no need for a nave. The qibla wall's mihrab is empty.

Look at the Great Mosque of Kairouan in Tunisia. What are the essential elements of the buildings?

- Siting: the quibla wall with its mihrab niche directs prayer in the direction of Mecca.
- Minarets: from here the faithful are called to prayer.
- Sahn: a courtyard for preparation before entering the hypostyle hall of the mosque.

Remember, the Dome of the Rock is a pilgrimage site, not a mosque. Also, mosques vary greatly in design and plan. The only essential feature is the mihrab.

Fig. 8 The Great Mosque at Cordoba

As we travel across north Africa from the Tunisian mosque, we now go north from Morocco into the south of Spain. It is here, under Abd al-Rahman I, that one of the great cultural and intellectual centers of the Medieval world developed. It is known as the new “Hispano” Umayyad Dynasty, for it developed from original Umayyads, whose capital had been Damascus. Initially, the mosque was built on the remains of a Christian church. We’ve already seen in the Dome of the Rock a similar appropriation of a site (as Stokstad states, it was both practical and symbolic). The interior, with its dramatic horseshoe arches (a Roman innovation, not Islamic) springing from columns, incorporated both remains of the Christian church as well as Roman architectural fragments. Recycling such elements such as the columns is called spolia, a term that refers to the re-use of sculpture or architecture for new purposes. We’ve seen, for example, that the Arch of Constantine recycled reliefs from the works of three earlier emperors. This complex relationship between continues to this day. Find the NY Times article, “Debate Over a Monument’s Name Echoes a Historic Clash of Faith,” *New York Times International*, Friday, November 5, 2010. What do you think about the debate?

Fig. 9 Tile Mosaic Mihrab, from the Madrasa Imami, Isfahan, Iran. Founded 1354 Met Museum

Now that we've gone far west to southern Spain, let's travel to the east. In the United States, one of the places to see the art of Islam is the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Among its treasures is a 14th century Mihrab from a madrasa originally found in Isfahan (in modern day Iran). It is a complex, rhythmic composition of color, abstract design, and text. Stokstad succinctly described how this glazed tile niche has three inscriptions: " the outer in cursive, contains Qur'anic verses (Surah 9) that describes the duties of the believers and the Five Pillars of Islam. Framing the niche's pointed arch, a Kufic inscription contains sayings of the Prophet. In the center, a panel with a line in Kufic and another in cursive states: "The mosque is the house of every pious person." Stokstad, p.275

Portable Arts: ceramics, metalwork, and paintings

Fig. 10 Khurasan Bowl; Bowl with Kufic Border, 11th -12th century, 14” Louvre

This functional object made for an educated owner, a bowl from Khurasan in modern day Iran, is of specific regional style. The graceful dark calligraphy on follows the form of the vessel. This type of white ground ceramics was inspired by Chinese ceramics known along the Silk Road (the subject of Unit 9). The inscription of this bowl reads: “Knowledge: the beginning of it is bitter to taste, but the end is sweeter than honey.” If you travel, in person or virtually, to say the British Museum, the Brooklyn Museum, see what those inscriptions say. This work links text, a functional personal object, and the exchange of ideas along travel routes.

Figs. 11 & 12 Muhammad Ibn al-Zain, Basin, so-called Baptistery of St. Louis, Syria or Egypt, c.1300 Louvre

Another important and well known type of portable art from Islam is metalwork. The work known as the Baptistery of St. Louis is a masterpiece of Islamic metal art design and craftsmanship, made of hammered bronze, engraved with gold, silver, and niello inlay. It expresses the power and aesthetics of the Mamluk Sultanate, a culture associated with Egypt and Syria for centuries. The basin was signed multiple times by the artist, Muhammas Ibn al-Zain, who must have worked for an important Mamluk patron. The surface is divided into three registers or sections. Below and on top are friezes with coats of arms and animals. In the center band are many figures, including Mamluk officials. Four horsemen in roundels express, perhaps allegorically, the virtues of horsemanship and hunting. Note that both the interior and exterior of the basin are decorated. Like other works of art, it changed purposes once acquired by another culture. In this case, the Mamluk basin became a royal baptistery in the French Royal court of the Gothic age. Some of the original coats-of-arms were re-engraved with fleur-de-lis, making it a French royal piece.

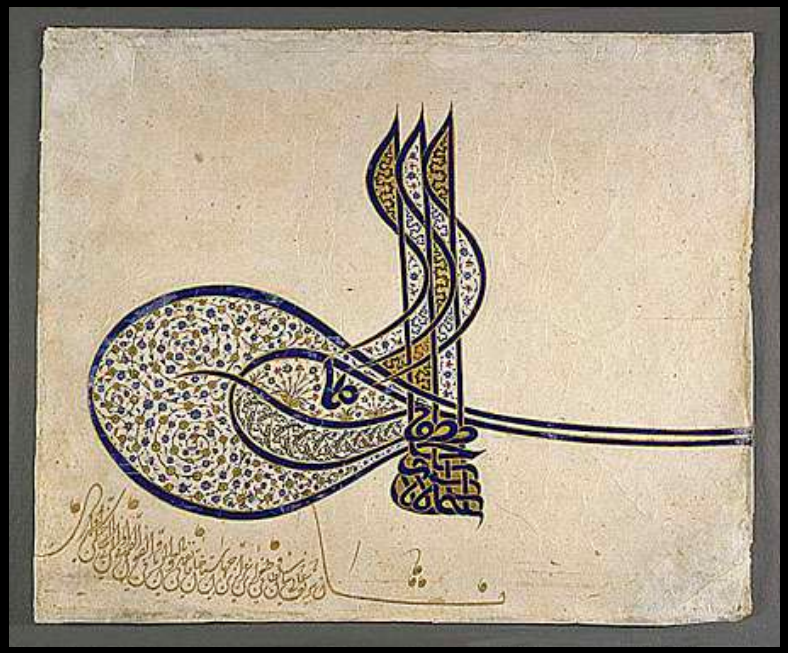


Fig. 13. Illuminated *Tugra* of Sultan Suleyman, from Istanbul, Turkey. C. 1555-1560.
Ink, paint, and gold on pager, removed from a *firman* and trimmed to 20” x 25”
Metropolitan Museum of Art

So far, we’ve seen writing on the buildings and ceramics of Islam. Later in the year we’ll look at Mughal manuscript illuminations as examples of the masterful book creations in Islam. But we’ll close this unit with a political form of writing, not spiritual. Tugras are imperial ciphers, that is, monograms or designs combining letters with emblems. Think of the symbols for popes or English kings. The Ottoman Turks advanced a type of calligraphy begun by the Mamluks and brought to its exquisite conclusion. Stokstad writes that: “Ottoman tugras combined the ruler’s name and the tile with the motto “Eternally Victorious” into a monogram denoting the authority of the sultan and of those select officials who were also granted an emblem. Tugras appeared on seals, coins, and buildings, as well as on official documents called firmans, imperial edits supplementing Muslim law.” (page 284). Practically speaking, the purpose of the tugra was to authenticate a state document. But it clearly goes beyond that. It expresses not only the power, but the intellect and taste of the Ottoman rulers. The tugra in your textbook expresses Ottoman power through its scale (25”), use of gold, controlled dynamic movement, and perfected proportions.

Tugras, as you might imagine, are found in many museums. For more information on tugras, go the website of a fascinating collaborative project by the BBC and the British Museum called The History of the World in One Hundred Objects. Don't be surprised to see different spellings from your textbook. Around the world people have various ways of saying and pronounced the same thing.

http://www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/objects/awykYG5tT-2zbY_SlZUufw

Discussion

- Compare and contrast the Tile Mosaic Mihrab from a Madrasa with the Transfiguration mosaic in San Apollinare, Classe. What are the similarities and differences in the ways that they create sacred spaces?

- Discuss the ways in which the Dome of the Rock draws upon traditions and simultaneously transforms them.

- Art and text is an important theme in art. Compare Khurasan bowl with another work of that employs text. Discuss the relationship between the text and the object or imagery.

- Find the equivalent of *tugras* where you live.

Unit 8: Islamic Art
Key Works

- Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem
- Great Mosque, Kairouan, Tunisia
- Prayer Hall, Great Mosque, Cordoba
- Tile Mosaic, Mihrab (Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY)
- Bowl with Kufic Border
- Muhammad Ibn al-Zain, Baptistery of St. Louis
- Illuminated Tugra of Sultan Suleyman

Terms

- Five Pillars of Islam
- Mosque
- Mecca
- Qibla
- Mihrab
- Minaret
- Sahn
- Horseshoe Arch
- Voussoir
- Kufic
- Tugra
- Arabesques
- Calligraphy
- Alhambra