

Islamic objects at the Ashmolean

- Most of the Islamic objects are on display in Gallery 31: The Islamic Middle East Gallery.
- The gallery does not contain many objects that directly link to Islam as a religion, but it does help us to understand more about Islamic culture.
- It is often thought that Islamic art does not contain representations of humans and animals. However, some objects on display incorporate images because they were not produced as religious pieces.
- The objects that feature in these notes have been selected specifically to enable exploration of ideas and issues relating to Islam as a religion, as well as Islamic art and civilisations.

Other galleries containing Islamic objects

Gallery 5: Textiles, Islamic textiles

Gallery 7: Money, Islamic coins

Gallery 6: Reading and Writing

Gallery 30: Mediterranean World, astrolabe and items relating to Jerusalem as pilgrimage centre

Gallery 28: Asian Crossroads, pilgrimage items

Gallery 33: Mughal India, inc changing displays of paintings that highlight wealth of Mughal court

Gallery 34: Medieval Cyprus, crusader coins

Gallery 31: Islamic Middle East

1. Square tile decorated with holy names
Iran, 1400-1500s



The tile is decorated with square kufic script and is inscribed with the names of Allah and the prophet, Muhammad, as well as his son in law and successor, Ali.

EA2003.57

Gallery 31: Islamic Middle East

2. Bowl with seated figures by a stream
Iran, 1200s



This is an example of lustreware, a skilled technique in use in the Islamic world from the 800s. By recreating the shiny effect of precious metals but on a humbler medium, lustre might have provided a response to the prophetic tradition (Hadith) which states 'he who eats from gold will have fire in his belly'.

EA1956.33

Gallery 31: Islamic Middle East

3. Hanging lamp Egypt, 1300s



Made to hang in a mosque, the flaring mouth of the lamp is decorated with Verse 24:35, The Light Verse from the Qur'an. The name that appears around the body of the lamp is Mamluk Sultan Muhammad ibn Qala'un who commissioned it.

EA1972.5

Gallery 31: Islamic Middle East

4. Door with geometric insets Egypt, 1300s-1400s



These doors highlight the prominent role of geometric patterns in the Islamic visual tradition. The design includes crosses, indicating that they may have been made for a (Coptic) Church rather than a mosque.

EA1984.16

Gallery 31: Islamic Middle East

5. Tombstone of a Muslim woman or girl North Africa, 1000s



Islamic tombstones are raised from the ground to pay homage to the dead. This tombstone marks the burial of 'Ghariba', daughter of Makhluf al-Jala. The inscription tells us that she died on 4 Shawwal of 431AH or 17 June 1040. It also includes Sura 112 of the Qur'an and a prayer for the dead girl's parents.

EA2006.21

Gallery 31: Islamic Middle East

6. Tile decorated with peonies & serrated leaves Turkey, 1500s



Flowers and plants are universally used as decorative patterns in the arts of the Islamic world. They appear in architectural decoration as well as on all kinds of objects. When used as repeating and interlocking patterns, floral and vegetal motifs are often referred to as 'arabesques'.

EA1978.1528

Gallery 31: Islamic Middle East

7. Semi-circular tile
Iran, 1800s



These tiles come from the story of Yusuf and Zulaikha in the Qur'an. This story originally derives from the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife in the Old Testament. In the Qur'an version the story is set in Memphis. The handsome Yusuf is a slave in the service of the wealthy Potiphar. His wife Zulaikha attempts unsuccessfully to seduce him.

EA 1965.169

Gallery 33: Mughal India

8. Model of the Qutub Minbar at Delhi
India, 1900s



This is a model of the largest minaret in the world, standing at 72.5 metres high. It was begun in 1193 by the first Muslim Sultan to rule at Delhi, and completed in the 1300s.

EA2010.36

Gallery 33: Mughal India

9. Glazed mosque tile
Punjab, 1700s



This tile is shaped like a mihrab, the mosque niche that shows Muslims the direction of Mecca for prayer. The inscription says 'God is sufficient'.

EAX.2517

Gallery 28: Asian Crossroads

10. Miniature Qur'an
Iran, 1300s



Miniature copies of the Qur'an may be carried by pilgrims on the Hajj.

EA1992.42

Changing displays: Islamic Arts of the Book

Regularly changing displays in Galleries 31 and 33 highlight examples of the arts of the book from across the Islamic World.

Lines of enquiry: RE

- Why is calligraphy central to Islamic religious art? The Qur'an and The Hadiths (prophetic traditions)
- The architecture and decoration of the mosque
- Similarities and differences between Islam, Christianity and Judaism.
- The use or non use of images in different religions – how can images help or hinder the worshipper?
- Diversity within religion eg why have different branches of Islam interpreted ideas about the representation of humans / animals in secular art differently at different times?

Lines of enquiry: Art & Design

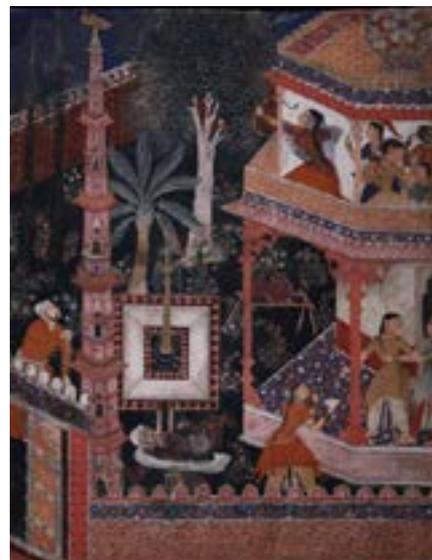
- Explore different styles of calligraphy in the gallery. There are different styles of script, often arranged in various patterns and colours. Calligraphy can be found painted on glass, carved into stonework, cut into metal, fired into pottery and written into books.
- Explore decorated tile work. This is found on everything from mosques to public drinking fountains. The geometric patterns are often complex and highly coloured. The same patterns can be used in relief carving on building. Try to copy some of the geometric patterns from examples in the gallery.
- Arabesque is a form of artistic decoration consisting of 'surface decorations based on rhythmic linear patterns of scrolling and interlacing foliage, tendrils' or plain lines. It can be found on ceramics, textiles, tiles and glass. Study two very different examples.

Cross curricular links

- History: rise and expansion of the Islamic empire, achievements of Islamic civilizations, the Crusades, different calendar system
- Mathematics: geometry and measures
- Citizenship: cultural diversity

Working with objects: key questions

- Who made it?
- Where and when was it made?
- What materials is it made from?
- How was it made?
- What was it used for? How was it used?
- Who used / owned it?
- How might it be interpreted by different people? at different times?



Mihrdukht shoots her bow at the ring, North India, c 1570 (LI118.1)

Further resources

Ashmolean Eastern Art Online:
www.jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/

The Museum of the History of Science offers taught sessions on Science in Islam and Symmetry in Islamic Design:
www.mhs.ox.ac.uk/education/

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