VOYAGE THROUGH THE ISLAMIC MIDDLE EAST TEACHERS’ RESOURCE

Explore Islamic Art & Design at the Home of Creativity

Key stages 1 & 2 Literacy and Art & Design

Ewer, Unknown, Iran, 1200-1220. ©Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
Introduction

The V&A began collecting Islamic art in 1853 because its founders believed that people could learn from studying these examples of good design. The Museum was the first public institution in the world to collect Islamic art and has one of the world’s best collections.

The V&A’s Jameel Gallery of the Islamic Middle East is a spectacular space containing over 400 objects, including ceramics, textiles, carpets, metalwork, glass and woodwork. Objects range from around 700 to the 1910s and come from a range of countries from Spain in the west to Uzbekistan and Afghanistan in the east including Turkey and Iran.

This resource takes students on a voyage around this inspiring Gallery. They will see objects made both for palaces and for mosques and other religious buildings. They will learn about the art and culture of another time and place and discover more about Islam, one of the major world religions.

Pre-visit activities

Ask students to help you to create a wall display of what they have learned, for example key words, motifs and a map, could all help students to engage with the theme before they visit.

A key feature of the Gallery is the enormous Ardabil Carpet, made by thousands of tiny knotted threads. Students could have a go at weaving and knotting before they visit using a simple hand-made loom. This would help them understand how impressive the carpet is and how long it took to make.

The Museum visit

Download the accompanying activities designed to support your visit. This resource contains introductory creative and discussion-based activities, devised to focus on the Jameel Gallery of Islamic Art, Room 42.

The resource can be used flexibly according to the time you have available. Bring additional paper and drawing pencils for the activities.

Islamic Faith

Islam is one of the three Abrahamic religions: Islam, Christianity and Judaism. These are monotheistic faiths i.e. only worshipping one God, which trace their common origin to Abraham or recognize a spiritual tradition identified with Abraham. Followers of Islam are called Muslims. Today, Muslims comprise about 23.4% of the world’s population. Islam is the second-largest religious community, after Christianity, and one of the fastest-growing religions in the world. The Islamic holy book is the Qur’an (sometimes spelt Koran), which followers of Islam believe to be the word of God as revealed through the Archangel Gabriel to the Prophet Mohammed in the early 7th century. Adam, David, Solomon, Jesus and Mary are also represented as important holy figures in the Qur’an.

Islamic Art & Design

Islamic art has a number of distinctive design elements, which are often combined in the decorative scheme on a single object: These include; rich colours; decorative patterns; calligraphy; floral or plant designs; geometric shapes & designs and symmetry. The Ardabil Carpet found in the centre of the gallery, is the world’s oldest dated carpet and one of the largest, most beautiful and historically important. The carpet demonstrates all of the described characteristics of Islamic art.

Figural images e.g. paintings of people appear in non-religious contexts, including palace decorations and some book illustrations. They do not appear in religious settings because although the Qur’an does not prohibit figural imagery, it has often been discouraged in Islamic law as potentially idolatrous.

Trade and Cultural Interaction

Until the sixteenth century, the Middle East was a hub of international trade. Luxury goods such as carpets and inlaid metalwork were exported to Europe, and other items such as Chinese porcelain were imported. Artists and designers in the Islamic Middle East were influenced by the style of foreign imports and their work also influenced art in other countries. Discover other examples of Islamic Art & Design across the Museum, visit the following galleries to find out more:

• Ceramics, Rooms 136-146
• South Asia, Room 41
• Medieval & Renaissance, Rooms 8-10, 50, 62 & 64

Follow-up activities/find out more

• Write and illustrate a story about the Lamps in the Ardabil Carpet
• Design and make an Ottoman tile inspired by the examples in the gallery.
• Make a design for a carpet, using colours and motifs found in the Jameel Gallery.