

# PLANT BASED DESIGN IN ISLAMIC ART TEACHERS' RESOURCE

*Explore the Islamic Middle East  
at the Home of Creativity*

*Key stages 3-5 Art & Design, Design & Technology*



# V&A



# Plant Based Design in Islamic Art

## Teachers' Resource

### Key Stages 3-5 Art & Design and Design & Technology

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## Introduction

### *Why look at plant-based motifs in Islamic Art & Design?*

A great number and variety of plant-based motifs and patterns appear in Islamic art across different mediums and historical periods. There are many outstanding examples on display in the Jameel Gallery of Islamic Art at the V&A.

Plant motifs and patterns were used to decorate architecture and objects from the earliest Islamic period. Artists drew inspiration from different types of plants and flowers at different times. Patterns were created using a range of techniques, including repetition of a motif within various grids, reflective and rotational symmetry, and freehand design.

Studying the varied and wide-ranging examples of Islamic plant-based designs at the V&A will give students lots of inspiration for creative projects. They will also learn how art from other cultures has influenced design history and see how designers have used and adapted decorative motifs and techniques from different times and places.

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## Pre-visit activities

Before the visit, ask students to discuss the following in small groups. *Where might you find examples of plant-based design in your home?* (e.g Crockery, textiles, wallpaper) Select your favourite and consider:

- Which plant might have inspired this design?
- How realistic is the depiction of the plant or flower?
- How is the design constructed? e.g. does the motif appear just once or is it repeated? If so, how?

Extend the discussion by using the accompanying PowerPoint presentation to highlight some of the objects that can be viewed at the Museum.

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## 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 drawing pencils and paper for sketching and annotating.

## Origins

The Islamic empire expanded rapidly from the 7th century onwards across regions in which earlier artistic traditions were firmly established. These earliest craftsmen continued to use techniques and semi-naturalistic motifs with which they were expertly familiar. In effect, Islamic art inherited motifs and ways of using them from other artistic traditions that were also inspired by plants. These include the art of the Byzantine empire from the eastern Mediterranean, of Coptic Egypt, and of the (pre-Islamic) Sasanian empire of Iran as well as Roman art. Plant-based design was one of the most common decorative elements, in addition to Arabic calligraphy and geometry.

## International Influences

In the 13th century the Mongols invaded western Asia and established a Mongol court in Iran. Many motifs that were common in Chinese art, such as the lotus and peony flower, began appearing in Islamic designs. These, too, became stylised, acquiring beautiful and fantastic forms unlike anything in nature. Later in the early 15th century, Ottoman art was strongly influenced by design in contemporary Iran; using motifs of scrolling leaves and lotus and peony flowers within dense pattern systems.

## Arts & Crafts Movement

As time passed, the stylisation of plant based motifs became increasingly complicated, with ever more complex patterns derived from scrolling leaves and flowers. This element of Islamic art was admired and emulated by some European artists, particularly during the 19th century. William Morris, the renowned Victorian designer, found inspiration in the ordered patterns of Islamic art and particularly admired the magnificent Ardabil Carpet, which is the V&A's largest and most famous piece of Islamic art. Morris developed many wallpaper and textile designs inspired by colours, patterns and motifs that he admired in Islamic art.

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## Follow-up activities/find out more

Find other examples of plant-based art and design in the Museum by visiting the following galleries:

- Asia Galleries, Rooms 41, 44, 47a-c
- Medieval and Renaissance Galleries, Rooms 8-10, 50, 62-64
- British Galleries, Room 125 (including works by William Morris inspired by Islamic art).