

CALLIGRAPHY IN ISLAMIC ART & DESIGN TEACHERS' RESOURCE

Explore the Islamic Middle East
at the Home of Creativity

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

A large, white, serif 'V&A' logo is positioned in the lower right quadrant of the image. The background is a rich, textured red silk fabric featuring intricate gold and blue calligraphic and floral patterns. The 'V' is tall and narrow, while the '&' is smaller and more ornate, and the 'A' is tall and narrow, mirroring the 'V'.

Calligraphy in Islamic Art & Design

Teachers' Resource

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Introduction

Why explore calligraphy through Islamic art?

Calligraphy is a highly distinctive and well-developed feature of Islamic art that appears across all art forms and historical periods. There are many outstanding examples on display in the Jameel Gallery of Islamic Art at the V&A.

Studying calligraphy presents an excellent opportunity for learning about Islamic culture as well as design techniques. The quantity and variety of examples on display in the Museum provides a wealth of inspiration for student design projects. Students can investigate the high cultural status accorded to calligraphy and the links between design, language and communication in cultures past and present.

Pre-visit activities

Before the visit, discuss the following with your group:

- *What do you associate with the word calligraphy?*
- *Have you ever come across examples of calligraphy?*
- *Why might people choose to make 'special' writing?*
- *Can a writing style change how we read a piece of text?*

It is not necessary to be familiar with the Arabic language or alphabet in order to explore the forms, variety and technical brilliance of Islamic calligraphy. However, students may enjoy learning just one simple Arabic letter form, which they can then pick out in many different examples of Arabic calligraphy.

Use the accompanying Exploring Calligraphy PDF to introduce the subject of calligraphy in Islamic art and design and discuss research ideas that students can explore further in the Museum and for their projects.

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 for sketching and annotating.

Beautiful Writing

The word calligraphy literally means '*beautiful writing*', creating it requires skill and artistry. Designs with calligraphy were created out of many different materials. Yet calligraphy often imitates the technical effects of pen on paper, even when it appears on other media. It is possible to see, for example, the graceful range from thick to thin line and the square shape of superscript dots written with a square-cut pen nib. Artists often made their designs by copying from prepared templates written out (on to paper) by a calligrapher.

Arabic Language

The Arabic language, and subsequently the art of calligraphy, is held in great esteem by Muslims because Arabic was the language in which the Qu'ran was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century. The Arabic text of the Qu'ran is sacred to Muslims, and its high status gave rise to an associated respect for books in general. Since Muhammad's time, Arabic has become a great world language, used over a huge area as a language of religion, government, commerce, literature and science. In time, the letters of the Arabic script, with the addition of a few new letter forms, were also used to write in Persian, Turkish and other languages, as well as Arabic.

Purpose

Most Islamic art was created for secular contexts, although some was created for religious contexts. It is a common misconception that all Islamic art is religious. Commonly, art that was commissioned for the palace was secular, while art that relates to mosques was always religious. In general, calligraphic inscriptions on works of art comprise one or more of the following types of text; Qur'anic quotations, other religious texts, poems, praise for rulers and aphorisms. These types of text can be seen across all art forms.

Follow-up activities/find out more

The development of sophisticated calligraphy as an art form is not unique to Islamic culture. Other examples include Chinese and Japanese calligraphy and illuminated bibles from north-west Europe including the famous Book of Kells. Other examples of calligraphy can be seen across the Museum in varying styles. Visit the following galleries to find out more:

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