

Lesson: Three Qur'ans

This lesson is accompanied by a handout,
Visual Analysis: Four Steps toward Critically Thinking about Art.

Essential questions: How do the elaborately decorated frontispieces of the Qur'ans studied in this lesson reflect Islamic religiosity? How do different decorative styles reflect the taste and aesthetics of different periods in the history of Islam?

Learning Experience: Vegetal design ("arabesque"), geometric pattern, and the use of Arabic script are the basic elements of Islamic design. Students will look at frontispieces from three Qur'ans and examine different styles of vegetal design and geometric patterning from Iraq, Egypt, and Anatolia. They will also develop a vocabulary for describing these works of art.

Read about the arts of the book in Islamic culture:

Marika Sardar. "[Arts of the Book—1600-1800.](#)"
Islamic Arts & Architecture, 2011.

A brief illustrated article describing the making of books in royal workshops.

Anticipatory Set: Although Islam forbids the use of human figures in religious contexts, Islamic art has a human face. How is this expressed through line, color, and decorative pattern?

Context: Calligraphic design, vegetal ornament and geometric patterning are the basic kinds of decoration in Islamic art. Although the Muslim world developed a distinctive vegetal design vocabulary,

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 (www: Plant).

Plants and their stems and foliage became the basis for intertwining, scroll-like patterns that echo the pen's movement in Arabic calligraphy. The use of plants and flowers range "from single motifs to extended patterns, and natural depictions of flowers to plant forms which are complicated and heavily stylized" (www: Plant).

Knowledge of geometry in Islam grew out of the translation of Greek scientific and mathematical texts into Arabic. This began in the eighth century under the Abbasid

dynasty (750-1258). The use of geometrically derived decoration was a way to avoid using the human figure in religious contexts. Geometric patterns

could convey a general aura of spirituality without offending religious sensibilities. In addition, the purity and orderliness of patterns and symmetries could evoke a sense of transcendent beauty which, at best, would free and stimulate the intellect (rather than trap it in the illusions of mere representation) (www: Pattern).

The arts of the book occupied the highest place in Islamic visual culture. Moreover, the complex patterns seen throughout the arts of Islam may have originated in book design. Also, the widespread use of [paper](#) beginning in the ninth and tenth centuries facilitated the creation of [pattern books](#). These allowed for the circulation of design formulae over wide areas (www: Pattern).

Books were luxury products requiring the skills of many different crafts.

The production of illustrated books was concentrated in royal workshops because of the large expense involved. . .Books were also financial investments, donated toward the endowment of charitable foundations, and status symbols presented as gifts between heads of state. . .Once a patron decided on a project, the director of the workshop saw it through to its conclusion. He laid out the pages, decided which parts of the text to illustrate, and chose scribes and artists based on the particular project (www: Sardar 2011).

The most important use of calligraphy and the skills related to book production was for the creation of Qur'ans:

The Qur'an is understood within the Islamic faith to be the revelatory word of God, dictated in segments by the angel Gabriel to the prophet Muhammad between the years 610 and 632 CE. The revelations were memorized and recorded word for word, and are today found in the Arabic text of the Qur'an in precisely the manner God intended.

. . .The Qur'an is, and has been from the beginning of the emergence of the religion, the primary reference point for Islam and the defining symbol of Islamic identity. . .It has been, and continues to be, the focal point of all Islamic devotion, manifesting itself especially in calligraphic art and epigraphy (Calder 2003: 3, 4).

Arabic script is read from right to left and pages are turned left to right. The most decorative part of a Qur'an was the frontispiece, the back of the first page which was always a right hand page in manuscripts. The frontispiece "gave illuminators an opportunity to create an artistic tour de force, independent from the calligraphy" (Derman 1998: 56).

The elaborate frontispieces seen in the Qur'ans discussed here represent three approaches to vegetal design and geometric pattern. By closely reading these objects, students will not only broaden their understanding of Islamic design but also gain insight into how the visual arts can express religiosity.

Rationale: As the uncreated word of God, the Qur'an is at the center of Muslim religious life. The skills that went into the design of the Qur'an's in this lesson reflect both Muslim spirituality and pleasure in the beauty of the natural world.

Instructional Resources: Frontispieces of three Qur'an's from Iraq, Egypt, and Anatolia;
Visual Analysis: Four Steps toward Critically Thinking about Art handout.

The observations below are meant to be a partial teacher's guide.

1. Qur'an (frontispiece)
Iraq, Zangid (1127-1262)
Late 12th or early 13th century
(KHAL.2006.0008)



<p>(A) Page, probably a Qur'an Iran or Iraq, Seljuq (c. 1040-1157) 1137</p>	<p>(B) Wash Basin and Jug Northern Iraq, post-Zangid Second half 13th century</p>
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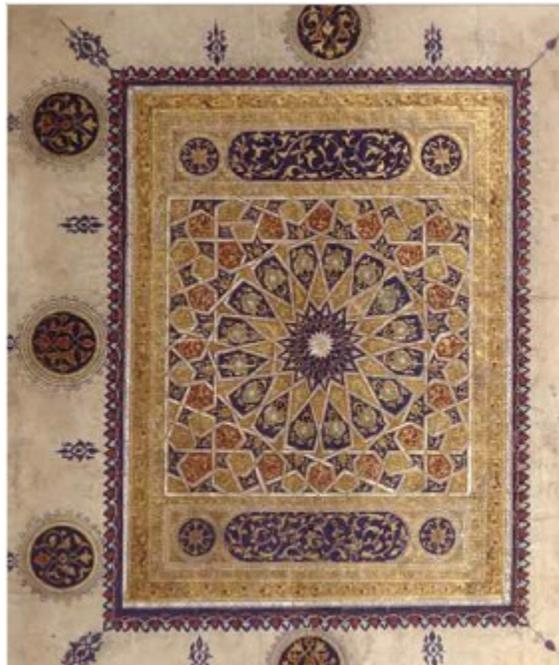
- The Zangid dynasty ruled Syria and northern Iraq as governors (atabegs) under the [Seljuqs](#). The Seljuqs were a Turkic people whose empire flourished between the ninth century and the thirteenth-century Mongol conquests.
- The image resembles an open book laid out flat with clasps to keep it closed when not in use. The design is symmetrical, a key principle in Islamic art.
- Gold and dark blue dominate the color scheme.

Each page of the frontispiece contains two pairs of lobed squares set on their corners connected by a pair of pointed oval figures. Small circles attach the pointed ovals to the strapwork border. The intervening fields are filled with palmette and scroll motifs or geometric patterns (James, 1992: 44).

- Kufic script in the lobed squares states "that this is the beginning of Part 28 of 30 parts and the end of the 'fifth section'" (James 1992: 44).

- The somewhat flat appearance of the design resembles inlay made with precious stones or metals. Inlay—setting metal, wood, ivory, etc., into a surface of contrasting color to create a pattern or image—is a common technique in Islamic art, particularly for metalware as in (B).
- Compare the similar color scheme but very different use of pattern in (A).

2. Qur'an (frontispiece)
 Egypt, Cairo, Mamluk
 14th century
 (KHAL.2006.0010)



(A) [Minbar](#)
 Egypt, Cairo, Mamluk
 1468-1496

- The [Mamluk](#) dynasty (1250-1517) was founded by slaves who had been taken from Central Asia to Egypt as boys. They were brought up as Muslims and trained in the military and civil arts by their masters, the Ayyubids, whose founder was the famous Saladin (r. 1174-1193).
- This frontispiece is dominated by a central geometric design, an elaborate sixteen-rayed star with a rosette at the center. Geometrically-inspired pattern is seen all over the Islamic world. The relation between mathematicians and designers/master craftsmen, however, is uncertain and a matter of [debate](#). Such patterns, called *gereh-sazi* in Persian, are used in brickwork, stucco, and tile.

Gereh-sazi takes the form of symmetrical geometric shapes, particularly six-, eight-, ten- or twelve-pointed star polygons. These are combined with a range of convex polygons, and separated from one another by straps which are often given the appearance of “weaving” under and over one another. *Gereh-sazi* is usually composed entirely with straight lines and angles although curvilinear elements are sometimes encountered. Like other modes of *gereh*, these strapwork compositions possess the potential for endless vertical and horizontal repetition over a two- or three-dimensional surface. This capacity for continual expansion is governed by strict adherence to an underlying geometric grid (Adapted from www: Milwright 2001).

- Compare the minbar (A) to the Qur’an frontispiece. How does the use of inlaid wood affect the geometric pattern? (A minbar is a stepped pulpit.)
- A web site called “[Taprats](#)” uses a Java applet that enables users to generate Islamic star patterns.

3. Qur’an (frontispiece)
Anatolia, Istanbul, Ottoman
15th century
(KHAL.2006.0014)



<p>(A) Qur'an Anatolia, Istanbul, Ottoman 1494</p>	<p>(B) Qur'an Cabinet Anatolia, Istanbul, Ottoman 16th century</p>
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- The [Ottoman Empire](#) (1299-1923) was one of the largest in world history. At its height it not only ruled over West Asia and North Africa but also parts of southern and eastern Europe. The Ottomans made significant contributions to Islamic visual culture in architecture, ceramics, painting, and calligraphy.
- “The Qur’an was revealed in the Hijaz; it was best recited in Egypt and best written in Istanbul” was a well-known saying in the Islamic world (Derman 1998:

21). (The Hijaz is the western coastal region of the Arabian Peninsula where Mecca and Medina are located.)

- The design has red leaf-like motifs around the border called palmettes. Medallions with gently interweaving vegetal motifs occupy the center of each page.
- The calligraphy is written in "[Thuluth](#)," a widely used script developed in the tenth century.
- Every inch is filled with stylized flowers and tendrils.
- The colors are typical of early Ottoman Qur'ans: deep blue, green, and black.
- Compare the colors and composition of (A) to this Qur'an. How is cover design similar to these two Qur'ans?
- Are there any similarities between the books and the Qur'an cabinet (B)?

Procedure: Students will discuss the three Qur'ans using the accompanying handout, *Visual Analysis: Four Steps toward Critically Thinking about Art*.

- Study the three Qur'ans using the basic elements of design—line, color, value, texture, space, shape, and form.
- Of the seven design elements, do some stand out as more important than others? Can you make a general statement with respect to the design issues that the creators of these works regarded as important?
- How do the Qur'ans differ? Consider this question using the basic design elements. Are the differences more important than the similarities?
- Look at examples of [Islamic art in other media](#) such as ceramics, textiles, metal, architectural tile, and stone work. Do different media have different aesthetic agendas compared to these Qur'ans? Why or why not?
- Study the basic artistic principles—balance, unity, emphasis, contrast, pattern, movement, and rhythm in terms of the three Qur'ans. Do some of these principles stand out as more important than others? Can you make a general statement with respect to the artistic principles that the creators of these works thought important?

Whole Group Reflection: How do these Qur'an pages express religious ideas non-verbally through color, line, and pattern?

British Library
[Online Gallery—Sacred Texts](#)

Compare sacred texts from Judaism,
Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and Buddhism

Instructional Modifications: The class can study illuminated manuscripts from other cultures such as the famous [Lindisfarne Gospels](#) (Lindisfarne, England; late 7th-early 8th centuries) and/or the [Diamond Sutra](#) (China, Gansu province, Dunhuang; 868) as groups, individuals, in class or as homework. They can compare designs using the visual analysis handout and also research the historical/cultural backgrounds of various sacred texts.

Application: Students can photograph (or draw) plants or everyday objects they feel would make effective patterns.

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Acknowledgements

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