

Lesson: An Imperial Decree, a Leaf, and a Lion

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

Essential questions: What different roles did calligraphy play in Islamic art? Why did beautiful handwriting maintain its prestige and usefulness long after the introduction of the printing press?

Learning experience: Students will discuss three examples of Ottoman calligraphy that go beyond everyday uses of the written word: an imperial decree, a sample of writing on a chestnut leaf, and the image of a lion made of calligraphy.

Anticipatory Set: The world is full of symbols. Before television, the internet, and other engines of modernity, did the pre-modern world have more symbols and were they more powerful?

Context: [Arabic script](#) is used to write many languages, including Persian and Ottoman Turkish. When used to write the classical Arabic of the Qur'an it is identified with the word of God and thus considered the highest form of art: "Although no other book matched the Qur'an in holiness—as God's eternal word—the Qur'an elevated the status of all books and the art of writing" (www: Writing).

Calligraphers were among the most highly regarded artists in Islamic societies, and this remains the case in many places today. Their status was based on the excellence of their work, but also on the eminence of their teachers. As a result, a literary tradition developed in which the history of calligraphy was conceived as a chain of transmission between masters and pupils, covering very long periods (www: Calligraphy).

Calligraphy had many uses in the Islamic world. Aside from mosques and other religious institutions, all kinds of buildings, both sacred and secular, were adorned with inscriptions in tile, stucco, carved stone, and other media. Objects for everyday use—ceramics, textiles, coins, seals, jewelry, lamps, utensils, arms and armor, etc.—were also decorated with writing. Educated men and women were trained in calligraphy and "took up the pen, whether artists of high merit, professional scribes, talented amateurs, or collectors and connoisseurs" (www: Contexts).

In the Islamic world there is a widespread adage that "the Qur'an was revealed in the Hijaz [the western coastal region of the Arabian peninsula]; it was best recited in Egypt and best written in Istanbul." (Derman 1998: 21).

With its capital at Istanbul (beginning in 1453), the [Ottoman Empire](#) (1299-1923) was one of the largest in world history. At its height it not only ruled over much of West Asia and North Africa but also parts of southern and eastern Europe. Outside of China, its government was only exceeded in size and complexity by the nineteenth-century European colonial powers. The Ottoman court made significant contributions to Islamic visual culture in architecture, ceramics, painting, and calligraphy. The court's establishment of design ateliers and craft workshops was a way of controlling the

development of artistic styles. It is believed that in the sixteenth century the palace employed almost nine hundred craftspeople.

These included painters, designers, tile makers, calligraphers, book binders, manuscript illuminators, goldsmiths, engravers, swordsmiths, bow and arrow makers, carpet and textile weavers, armorers, gunsmiths, furriers, ivory craftsmen, musical instrument makers, and potters (www: Islam).

Even in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when Europe profoundly influenced the traditional arts of most West Asian cultures, Ottoman calligraphy survived due to the

absence in Europe of a comparable art that could exert an influence on calligraphy [and] the continuation of the master-and-apprentice system among classically trained calligraphers (Derman 1998: 21).

The three pieces in this lesson are unusual examples of the use of writing: a *tugra* or imperial emblem, calligraphy written on an elaborately prepared chestnut leaf, and script used to create the image of a lion. All three stretch the limits of the written word. They also show how Arabic script satisfied an aesthetic emphasizing the purity of linear design and its capacity to express non-verbal messages. Studying these objects allows students a view into what might be called the cutting edge of the pre-modern world, a world in which everything was made by hand.

Rationale: Learning about the many uses of calligraphy in the Islamic world is one way of looking at Islamic art through the eyes of Muslims.

Read about calligraphy in Islam:

[Calligraphy in Islamic Art](#)

A concise guide to script styles, materials and techniques,
and the role of calligraphers in Islamic society.

Victoria and Albert Museum

Instructional Resources: An Ottoman imperial decree, calligraphy on a chestnut leaf, a calligraphic lion; *Visual Analysis: Four Steps toward Critically Thinking about Art* handout.

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

1. Ottoman Imperial Decree (detail)
Turkey | Ottoman
Late 16th century
(KHAL.2006.0005)



<p>(A) Throne of Sultan Ahmed I Turkey, Istanbul, Ottoman (1281-1923) 1603-1617</p>	<p>(B) Treasure of the Septuagenarian Son of Heaven China, Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) 1780</p>
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- This is the [tugra](#) of Sultan Murad III (1546-1595). Every Ottoman sultan had his own unique *tugra* designed by court calligraphers. The cursive calligraphy gives the sultan’s name together with that of his father, followed by the traditional title “Khan” and the words “Ever Victorious.” After the eighteenth century use of the *tugra* expanded.

“The Ottoman *tugra* was used as the coat of arms of the dynasty. . .and was employed on such official items as postage stamps, flags, ships, coins and government buildings. The format of the *tugra* was also later applied to writing Koranic verses, prayers and names of individuals” (www: Turkish).

- This *tugra* uses vegetal decoration consisting of tiny blue and black flowers with touches of red.
- The calligraphy and the overall design are a symbol of royal legitimacy and power—the base of the *tugra* is said to represent the throne. The *tugra* was used for imperial edicts and other documents.
- The throne of Ahmed I (A) is another symbol of imperial power.
- Compare the *tugra* with a seal (B) carved in honor of the seventieth birthday of China’s Qianlong emperor (r. 1736-1795). In China [seals](#) were usually carved from stone and the impression was made with vermilion ink. They were used, like the *tugra*, for state documents. Unlike the *tugra*, however, the use of seals was not limited to the ruler, official documents, or the state.

2. Calligraphy on a Leaf
 Turkey | Ottoman
 19th century

(KHAL.2006.0097)



(A) [Kashkul](#)
Iran
c. 1859-1860

- This nine-inch-high horse chestnut leaf is inscribed with a Quranic verse in [Thuluth](#) script. This type of object became popular in the late Ottoman empire.
- The leaf is inscribed upside down with part of Qur'an 12: 64, "But God is the best to take care [of him], and He is the Most Merciful of those who show mercy!" (Rogers 1995: 270).
- The script is applied with a stencil and the process of preparing the delicate leaf is very difficult. It involves removing the leaf's tissue leaving only its vein-like skeletal system.
- What is the significance of having a Quranic verse on a leaf? Is it just a decorative and technical tour de force? Another large [chestnut leaf](#) features a Qur'anic verse about Muhammad's [Night Journey](#) written in the shape of a beautiful boat: "Lord grant me a good entrance and a goodly exit, and sustain me with Your power." Perhaps the course of human life is symbolized by the life cycle of a tree.
- Analyze and compare this to another natural object transformed through decoration: (A) is a beggar's bowl made for a [Sufi](#) mystic. Inscribed with passages from the Qur'an and Persian poetry, it is carved from a very large nut shell.

It is the fruit of the *coco de mer* palm which grows in the Seychelles Islands, in the Indian Ocean. The shell washes ashore in southern Iran. The shell's journey took on spiritual significance as a symbol of the dervish's journey on the ocean of mystic knowledge. Many "*kashkuls*" even have a "prow" carved on them. Others, including this one, have a small spout to make the bowl into a drinking vessel (www: Kashkul).

3. Calligraphic Composition in the Form of a Lion Turkey | Ottoman

1913
(KHAL.2006.0004)



<p>(A) Zoomorphic Calligraphy of a Lion India, Mughal (1526-1858) 17th century</p>	<p>(B) Heart Sutra Written in the Shape of a Pagoda China, Gansu, Dunhuang, Cave 17 Not later than 1000</p>
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- This calligraphic lion is called a “zoomorphic image.” “Zoomorphic” means having the shape or form of an animal.

Turkish calligraphers were masters of transforming words and phrases into the shapes of animals. Artists achieved these effects by elongating, wrapping, and rotating letters to create the contour (outline) as well as details of the animal. Favorite animal shapes include the lion, peacock, and stork. They also created calligraphic compositions in the form of fruit, plants, and architecture (www: Islamic).

- The script is cursive Thuluth and the text refers to Ali (c. 600-661) as “the victorious lion of God,” an honorific Muhammad bestowed upon him. Ali was Muhammad’s son-in-law, the fourth Sunni caliph, and the first male to convert to Islam. [Shi’ite](#) Muslims believe him to be the first caliph, the Prophet’s true successor. Reverence for Ali, however, is not limited to Shi’ite Muslims.
- The lion’s five claws stand for God, Muhammad, Ali, and Hasan and Husayn (Muhammad’s grandsons and Ali’s sons). The lion’s red tongue symbolizes Ali as the spokesman of Muhammad (Rogers 1995: 258).
- Image (A) shows an earlier but similar calligraphic lion. It includes a detailed description of the text making up the lion’s body.
- Compare image (B), a brief Buddhist text found in a cave near Dunhuang, a city located on one of the major routes of the Silk Roads. It is written in the shape of a pagoda and thus becomes a devotional object, something more than a text. (Pagodas are the Chinese version of the Indian [stupa](#), a memorial or shrine.)

Procedure: Students will discuss the four calligraphic pieces using *Visual Analysis: Four Steps toward Critically Thinking about Art*.

- Study these calligraphic pieces 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? If not, how would you group these works according to their similarities?

- Consider the *tugra* (1) and the lion (3). Why is legibility unimportant in these pieces? Can you think of anything you've seen which uses writing in a similar way?
- Study the basic artistic principles—balance, unity, emphasis, contrast, pattern, movement, rhythm—in terms of these five objects. 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 does the Roman alphabet compare with Arabic as a vehicle for design? How does Arabic compare with, for instance, [Chinese](#)?

Instructional Modification: Students can research Ottoman Empire history and the social and cultural backgrounds of the three objects.

Application: Students surf the web and/or look at newspapers and magazines for typography that does more than simply convey a written message.

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