

Lesson: Two Samanid Bowls with Calligraphic Inscriptions

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

Essential Question: How did Islamic craftspeople adapt calligraphy—normally written on paper with a reed pen—to decorate objects such as the ceramics studied in this lesson?

Learning experience: The decorative language of Islamic art expresses itself uniformly across many different areas, from monumental architecture to everyday objects such as ceramics, textiles, and glassware. Calligraphy-based design is one of the foundations of this decorative language. This lesson focuses on two bowls inscribed with Arabic proverbs. Students will be asked to examine how calligraphy was adapted to the demands of the potter's art.

Anticipatory set: Can you imagine these proverb-inscribed bowls as a medieval version of what we call “branding”? Many of the things we wear, use, or otherwise come into contact with in daily life are branded. The branding on these Samanid bowls is moral and ethical in content. Do modern branded objects and institutions have an effect beyond pride of ownership and attracting the attention of consumers?

Context: The Abbasid dynasty (750-1258) was the second Islamic caliphate, ruled by descendants of Muhammad's uncle Abbas. Its domains stretched from North Africa to the borders of China and India. From the mid-ninth century on, however, the dynasty's ability to control such an empire gradually weakened as regional centers of power sprang up. One of these, the [Samanids](#) (819-1005, the ruling family came from a place called “Saman”), was of Iranian stock. It controlled large parts of eastern Iran, Afghanistan, and [Central Asia](#) (modern day Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan). Their major cities—Bukhara and Samarkand (in Uzbekistan) and Nishapur (in northeastern Iran)—were centers of art, literature and trade along the Silk Roads. Samanid coins have been found as far afield as Scandinavia.

This region had been conquered by the Arabs in the seventh century. The Samanids were the first native dynasty to rule Iran after the Arab conquests. They were great patrons of Iranian culture. The Samanids were patrons of Firdawsi's (c. 940-1020) [Shahnameh](#) (“Book of Kings”), Iran's national epic and a text glorifying its pre-Islamic culture and history.

Samanid Art

Ceramics are the most abundant remains of this dynasty's visual culture. A surviving example of Samanid architecture is the [Mausoleum of Ismail](#) (c. 914-943). The tenth-century [Saint Josse Shroud](#) is one of the few extant Samanid textiles.

Nevertheless, Samanid culture did not completely break with Arabic culture. The Samanids continued to recognize the Abbasid caliphate as nominal overlords. Although the *Shanameh* was written in a new language—Persian (also called “Farsi”), it was a language that used words of Arabic origin and was written in a version of Arabic script. Also, “many works of this period clearly address a bilingual audience” (Pancaroglu 2006: 66). This continued connection to Arabic culture is also reflected in the use of Arabic script and Arabic proverbs on the two bowls featured in this lesson.

These two pieces and others like them are important because they are “the first substantial group of ceramic vessels consistently decorated with calligraphic writing” (www: Pancaroglu). Calligraphic design, along with [vegetal motifs](#) (“arabesque”) and [geometric patterning](#), are the foundations of Islamic visual culture.

Read about the importance of calligraphy in Islamic culture:

[Calligraphy in Islamic Art](#) (Victoria and Albert Museum)
[Traces of the Calligrapher/Writing the Word of God](#) (Asia Society)
[Arabic Calligraphy](#) (Museum With No Frontiers)

Both bowls are decorated using [Kufic](#) script, which was the earliest style of Arabic calligraphy. (The name comes from Kufa in Iraq, the place where it was said to have originated.) This stately, squared writing was used for the earliest Qur’ans but was gradually replaced by other styles, although it was still used for many ornamental purposes.

The formality of Kufic script is perhaps appropriate for these proverbs. The largest group of surviving inscriptions is about generosity. They “praise the act of giving and urge the reader to do so” (www: Pancaroglu). [Other inscriptions](#) contain moral injunctions about personal conduct, others offer simple blessings. These pieces have been linked to contemporary notions of gentlemanly conduct and self-cultivation. Books of the period from the heartland of Arab culture in Baghdad discuss suitable inscriptions for everyday objects. They mention verses appropriate for books and clothing, bowls, bottles, and even mosquito nets (Pancaroglu 2006: 62, 63).

These Samanid bowls affirm the high status of calligraphy in Islamic culture. Their moral injunctions also reflect the Qur’an’s image of God as a potter and humankind as clay to be worked:

And certainly We created man of clay that gives forth sound, of black mud fashioned in shape (Qur’an 15: 26).

Rationale: This lesson encourages students to think critically about sophisticated craft techniques and their socio-cultural contexts.

Instructional resources: Two inscribed bowls from the Samanid dynasty and two comparison pieces for each; “Eight Uses of Kufic Script,” a group of objects from the internet; *Visual Analysis: Four Steps toward Critically Thinking about Art* handout.

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

1. Slip-Painted Bowl
 Iran, Nishapur, Samanid (819-1005)
 10th century
 (KHAL.2006.0092)



<p>(A) Dish Eastern Iran or Uzbekistan 10th century</p>	<p>(B) Bowl Eastern Iran or Uzbekistan 900-1000</p>
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- The Kufic inscription reads “Generosity is the disposition of the dwellers of Paradise, He said.”
- This kind of bowl is “like no other type of pottery that is produced anywhere in the Islamic world before or since the Samanid period, and they bear no aesthetic relation to the major pottery types that coexisted with them” (www: Black). They are also an exception to Islamic art’s predilection for all-over surface design.
- The calligraphy is written in brownish or purplish black slip on a white background.(Slip is clay mixed with water to a cream-like consistency.)
- Decorating ceramics with Arabic script is not the same as writing it on paper with a reed pen. After the letters are drawn on the white surface glaze, they are incised with needle-thin linear detail, what potters call “*sgraffito*” (Italian for “to scratch”). *Sgraffito* involves taking a sharp pointed tool and removing areas of the black slip, exposing the white glaze underneath. This is done when the piece is leather-hard, that is to say, still somewhat damp.
- The *sgraffito* on this piece is subtle: zoom in and look at the straight bar-like letter just below nine o’clock. The white lines are the result of *sgraffito*. This is also

seen on the triangular shape at six o'clock and elsewhere on this piece. This technique is used more extensively on bowl (2).

- [Other ceramic cultures](#) also used *sgraffito*.
- Compare: Bowl (1A) is similar to (1) but has a bolder, simpler design. Bowl (1B) reverses the color scheme: white calligraphy on a black background.

2. Bowl with Calligraphic Decoration
Samarkand, Transoxania, Samanid (819-1005)
11th century
(KHAL.2006.0090)



<p>(A) Bowl Iran, Samanid (819-1005) 10th century</p>	<p>(B) Bowl with Arabic Inscription Iran, Nishapur, Samanid (819-1005) Late 10th-11th century</p>
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- The calligraphy on this bowl is repeated eight times. The script has no meaning. It is an example of [pseudo-calligraphy](#), that is to say, meaningless writing which still conveys the graphic power of a written symbol.
- Unlike bowl (1), this piece places the Kufic script within an elaborate design. Only the bowl's center is undecorated.
- The outer edge is a tessellated pattern. Tessellations are made of interlocking parts fitting together with no gaps between them.
- The verticals of the script create compartments. Within each compartment the script shares space with a single arabesque pattern—a stylized vegetal scroll with bifurcated leaves.
- The tessellated pattern on the outer edge, the Kufic letters and vegetal scrolls, and even the dot in the bowl's center are all either shaped or given subtle linear detail through *sgraffito*. The skill involved is inseparable from the skill which created the Kufic calligraphy.

- Compare: Bowl (2A) is an elaborate design using color and “a series of irregular panels following the contours of the letters.” Bowl (2B) shows “a large central motif of interlacing straps on a stippled ground.”

Procedure: This lesson has two parts: The first takes a close look at the Samanid inscribed bowls (1) and (2) and their respective comparison pieces (1A), (1B), (2A) and (2B); the second part asks students to investigate other examples of Islamic art with Kufic script. Teachers might want to use this [Ceramics Vocabulary List](#) (Solon City Schools; Solon, Ohio) to learn some of the basic terms.

(1)

- For homework students will watch a brief [video](#) of a calligraphy demonstration (CalligraphyQalam.com) and read [Arabic Calligraphy](#) from the Museum With No Frontiers. They should pay particular attention to the different materials and techniques used to create the featured objects as well as to the sections on Kufic script.
- Whole class discussion reviewing the homework assignment. The teacher writes the main points on the board.
- The class is divided into groups. Each group studies either bowl (1) or bowl (2).
- Give each student a visual analysis worksheet. 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?
- Study the basic artistic principles—balance, unity, emphasis, contrast, pattern, movement, and rhythm in terms of the two bowls. 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?
- The entire class then compares pieces (1A), (1B) and (2A), (2B) with (1) and (2).

(2)

- Whole class discussion: Although writing Arabic script is based on use of a reed pen and paper, calligraphy appears on many other materials. How do different materials and techniques affect the use of calligraphy?
- The teacher brings up the question of *sgraffito* on bowls (1) and (2) as discussed in the instructional resources section (above). Questions: In the calligraphy video for the homework assignment, did you see anything comparable to the potter’s use of incised lines on bowls (1) and (2)? Why or why not? Would bowl (2) look the same without the use of *sgraffito*? Why or why not?
- The class is divided into eight groups. Each group is assigned one of the works in the table below. Each piece uses Kufic script, each represents a different craft technique and six different materials.

Eight Uses of Kufic Script

<p>STONE (CARVED) Monumental Inscription Fatimid (909-1171) 9-10th century</p>	<p>METAL (CAST) Ewer Iran 12th century</p>
<p>CLOTH Woven Fragments Almeria, Spain c. 1100-1150</p>	<p>TILE (MOLDED) Tile Syria 12th century</p>
<p>WOOD (CARVED) Carved Wooden Piece Abbasid (750-1258) 10-11th century</p>	<p>METAL (INLAID) Square Tray Iran, Khurasan 13th century</p>
<p>PAPER Folio from a Qur'an Seljuk period c. 1180</p>	<p>TILE (CARVED) Architectural Tile Uzbekistan Second half 14th century</p>

- Groups research the craft technique used for each piece. Some of this can be attained from the descriptions provided on the web sites although some Googling will be required for full definitions.
- Group reports: (1) Description of the piece in detail, including size, if given; (2) a description of the technique employed to create the object and its written inscription; (3) Analysis of the piece using the visual analysis worksheet.

Whole group reflection: How do different techniques and materials change the appearance and visual impact of calligraphic inscriptions?

Instructional modification: Take a look at the [range of inscriptions](#) seen on Samanid pieces and compare them to proverbs from other cultures.

Application: Students can collect examples of modern objects that have writing on them and investigate them in terms of message and artistic value.

Bibliography

“‘Black on White’ Epigraphic Pottery.” *A Web-based Teaching Course on Islamic Ceramics*. Ashmolean Museum.
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Acknowledgements

This lesson was created by Eve Eisenstadt, its academic content approved by Kristina Richardson, and the final lesson edited by Martin Amster.