

# ISLAMIC PATTERNS

## DAGGER – 17TH CENTURY

The hilt on this dagger is made from pure gold, and decorated with rubies, emeralds and diamonds, using the kundan technique. The kundan technique is a traditional form of Indian jewellery-making, in which the stones are set into the gold with a layer of gold foil, and the jewels are rounded into the surface, not set on top of it. The hilt is carved into a tiger at one end, and a duck on the other. Workmanship of this degree of artistry and skill is of the utmost rarity.

The very precious gems and the exquisitely intricate patterns show that the design has taken precedent over the stones, giving it a certain prestige and status.

The blade has been made with a thicker tip, which reinforces the blade and prevents anything happening to it if it were used in battle. Like many pieces in the Wallace Collection armouries, it has been designed to look like a weapon but would primarily have been used as an ornament while displaying craft and skill as well as wealth, power and status.

At the Mughal court in the first half of the 17th century, jewelled daggers were used by the emperor and were given to courtiers and princes as a sign of royal favour. This dagger was almost certainly made for a prince of the Mughal court, probably for Shah Jahan (builder of the Taj Mahal).



IN DETAIL



**DATE** Early 17th century  
**MATERIALS** Gold, watered steel,  
rubies, emeralds, diamonds  
**SIZE** 35.1 cm

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**MAKER** Unknown  
**PLACE** India

## RESEARCH & DISCUSS

### HISTORY



The Mughal Empire stretched over India, Afghanistan, Kashmir, Bangladesh and South India and lasted for over two centuries. This dagger likely belonged to an emperor, Shah Jahan.

- Find out more about the Mughal Empire. It was established in 1526 but by whom? When did it come to an end? How and why did it end?
- By 1700, Mughal India had become the world's largest economy. How did India's economy expand under the Mughal Empire, and how was it kept strong and stable in this period?

Examine the average GDP (gross domestic product, or size of the economy) over time - what was the GDP when the British took control of India, during British colonial rule, and when India gained independence?

- Who was Shah Jahan, and what else is he famous for? What was neglected under his rule and what flourished?

### DESIGN



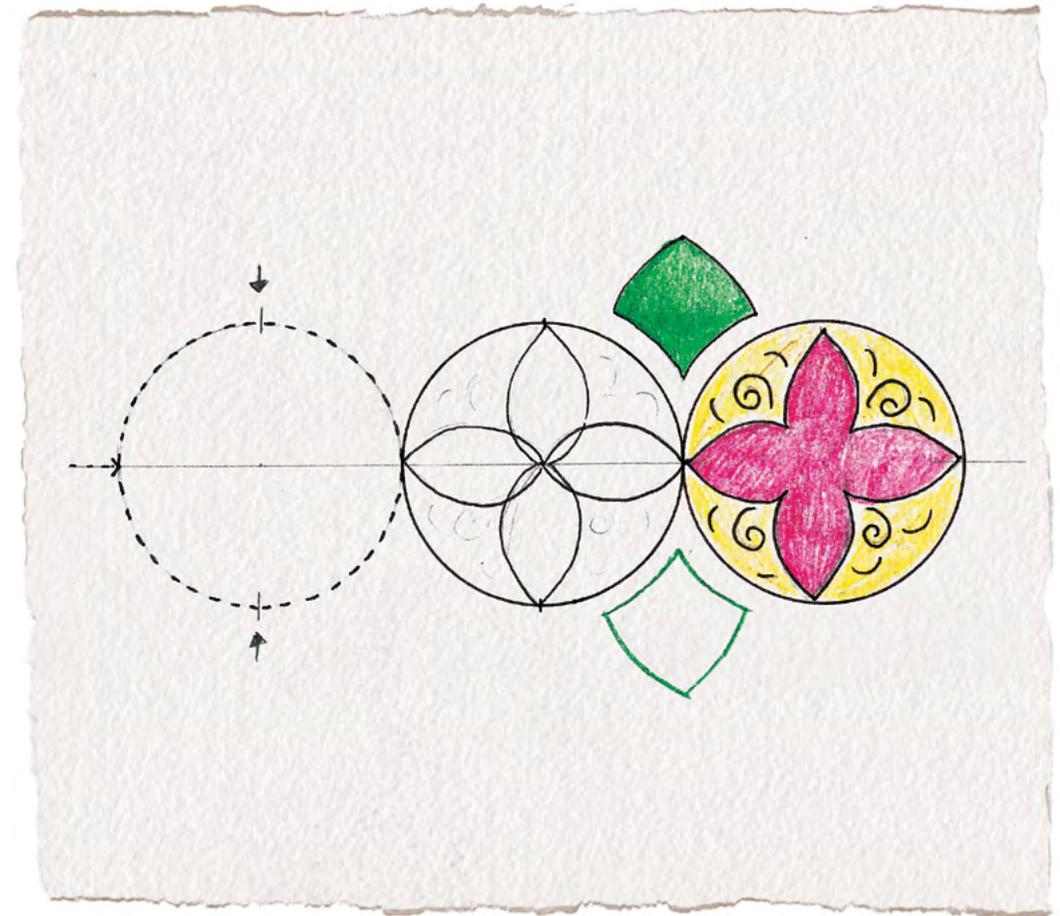
- Flowers and biomorphic representation feature heavily in Islamic and Indian art, architecture, textiles and manuscripts, and play an important role in south Asian cultures and traditions. Look at the flowers on the sheath of the dagger. What real flowers could they be based on, or inspired by? Which plants have similar-style leaves?
- How are the flowers arranged within the space? Where is the symmetry, and how does symmetry and reflection play a role in Islamic art?
- The border shapes on the sheath and also the hilt reflect multifoil arches. Look up multifoil arches - where can they be found?
- Many European artists and designers, for example William Morris, were influenced by floral patterns in illumination, architectural tiling and other facets of design and adornment from Muslim societies. Who are some other famous designers and what did they do? What movements were they part of, and how did their take on Islamic and Asian art become popular? Look up Emery Walker, May Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement as a starting point.
- Although William Morris-style designs became very popular, his inspirations from Islamic and Asian art are not often cited or credited. Why do you think this is?

## ACTIVITY Creating a pattern



If you look closely at the different gold parts of the dagger, you will see a range of repetitive geometric patterns, in various sizes. Look closely at the ball on top. Create your own pattern using a compass, pencil and ruler.

- Draw a horizontal line with a ruler.
- Open the compass to 2cm and, placing it on the horizontal line, draw a circle.
- Repeat the circle along the line.
- Within the circle, estimate the north and south points, or 12 and 6 on a clock face, and make a small mark - these will be your next points of reference.
- From the centre, draw a petal shape to each of the four points.
- Add colour and some extra design - your own touch.
- These circles can also be repeated horizontally and vertically to give an overall repeat pattern.



## ACTIVITY Drawing flowers



Patterns can be created in a variety of ways: using an underlying geometric grid, through repetition of motifs, symmetry and reflection, and also by freehand design within a specific space.

- Practice drawing a wide teardrop shape, that ends in a point slightly leaning to one side. This will form the basis of the petal for your flower.
- Sketch out a circular shape: you can use a compass, or map it out by eye.
- In your circle, mark out 5 points that are roughly equidistant from each other (think of a pentagon).
- Each of those points can be one of your petals, which you can sketch in and add colour.

Symmetry and balance is a key component in Islamic art, even in floral designs. What happens on one side is reflected on the other.



## ACTIVITY Using symmetry



- In any given space, either using a ruler to measure or estimating by eye, draw a vertical line of symmetry.
- At the top, draw in a circle, which will be the placeholder for a large flower.
- Draw another circle halfway down the line, and then two circles to one side of the stem, or line of symmetry, placing them so there is an even distribution of positive and negative space. You may have to redraft this stage a few times.
- Now that one side is ready, draw the same on the other side, placing the circles in mirror positions. It may be useful to use tracing paper for this stage to place them precisely.
- Add in your flowers in the circles.
- Add in leaves and foliage around the flowers, keeping the amount of negative and positive space consistent.



## ACTIVITY Drawing a basic multifoil arch



Throughout Mughal art and architecture, you will see multifoil arches. One way of drawing these is using a compass and ruler.

- Draw a horizontal and vertical line (each 10cm long for an A4 piece of paper) meeting at 90 degrees.
- Open the compass to 10cm, placing the point on where the two lines cross. Draw an arc (part of a circle) from the top of the vertical line to the widest part of the horizontal one.
- Open the compass to a 2cm radius and place the point where the vertical line touches the arc. Draw in the circle.
- Move the compass with the same radius along the arc, and place the point where the small circle you drew crosses the arc.
- Repeat this with a series of circles - you will see a pattern forming along the arc.
- The tops of the circles form the pattern of the multifoil arch. At the very top of the arch, draw in a point by hand (think of the top of a soft-serve ice cream peak) and mark in the lines to make your arch.

