

# ISLAMIC PATTERNS

## WHAT IS ISLAMIC ART?

Islamic art has a strong aesthetic appeal that transcends time and place, as well as differences in languages and culture. It is often considered sacred and made to glorify God (Allah).

Adorning buildings, manuscripts, and objects, it is traditionally made up of three visual elements: calligraphy, geometry and biomorphic patterns.

Islamic art has an underlying spirituality which gives it a coherence, regardless of the country or time in which it was created, and provides meaning and essence beyond the physical form.

As a sacred art, wherever it appears – on the interiors of buildings and designed into the architecture, illuminating manuscripts or on objects such as those in the museum’s collection – its purpose is to invoke contemplation and ultimately remind one of God. Muslims believe that there is no god but God, (the same God that Christians, Jews, and other monotheistic faiths believe in).

There is a tradition of the Prophet Muhammad, where he says ‘No one will enter Paradise who has an atom’s weight of pride in his heart.’ A man responds, ‘What if a man likes his clothes to look good and his shoes to look good?’. The Prophet said, ‘Allah is beautiful and loves beauty. Pride means denying the truth and looking down on people.’

The Qur’an encourages people to do everything we can with *ihsan* – with excellence, and with *taqwa* – god-consciousness. This includes art, design, architecture, and all aspects of creativity.



Al-Qarawiyyin University Fez, Morocco

# WHAT IS ISLAMIC ART?



**PLACE** Al-Qarawiyyin University  
Fez, Morocco  
**DATE** 859 AD

## THREE KEY ELEMENTS

### Calligraphy

Verses of the Qur'an, sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, and poetry, often in beautifully written Arabic and Farsi script using ink and reed pens, to beautify the word of God and bring it to life on the page, forming a relationship with the onlooker even if they do not know the language.

### Geometry

Shape-based patterns that are derived from a single circle, and repeated over an underlying grid construction. The number patterns found in Islamic geometric patterns are often the same number patterns that are found in the natural world, the cosmos, even our own molecular structure. The patterns serve as a reminder to contemplate the vastness of creation, the creator God, and humanity's role within the universe.

### Islimi (biomorphic)

These are floral, leaf and spiral patterns that are inspired by flowers and leaves in nature, but are stylised versions of them. In some areas they are more naturalistic than others. They surround calligraphic inscriptions and are painted on tiles to remind the onlooker that there is a life after death, and of gardens of paradise, for which we have no image so can only imagine.

## RESEARCH & DISCUSS



- Look up the 'golden section' and the Fibonacci sequence. Where can they be found in the natural world?

## ACTIVITY



- Can you pick out the three key elements from the al-Qarawiyyin University image?
- Find examples of the three key elements - calligraphy, geometry and biomorphic - from different geographic locations around the world and varied time periods. What do they have in common with one another and what are the differences?

# THE WALLACE COLLECTION

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**PLACE** Armoury I at the Wallace Collection, London

## THE ORIENTAL ARMOURY

The objects featured in these resources are from the armouries at the Wallace Collection. The armouries contains arms and armour from across the world, including Japan, India, Iran, Turkey and Ghana. Paintings, jewellery, lamps and other objects also form part of the collection on display.

The gallery was previously known as 'The Oriental Armoury', and the 19th-century paintings within were termed 'Orientalist', meaning paintings or literature which represented, or even invented, an exotic and entertaining idea of non-western cultures for the enjoyment of western audiences.



## RESEARCH & DISCUSS



- How did these objects end up in London?
- Why are the terms 'Oriental' and the 'Orientalist' paintings problematic? What does it tell us about the times that the collectors of these objects were living in, and what does that have in common with our contemporary context?

## ACTIVITY



- Using historical evidence and contemporary debate around the topic, build a case for and against object repatriation. This could be in the form of a speech, a news article, or an extended thread of social media posts using infographics, images, and detailed captions.