

Heaven on Earth: Islamic Art and Culture

Background: Muslims (“believers”) are followers of Islam (“submission to God”), established by the Arab Prophet Muhammad (c. 570-632 CE), the last in a series of prophets sent by God. Sacred book is the Qur’an/Koran, which records the visions and spiritual experiences spoken by Muhammad over a 10-year period.

Five Pillars/Practices of the Faith

- *Shahada* – profession of faith/monotheism: “There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet”
- *Salat* – ritual prayer, 5 times per day: call to prayer heard throughout a Muslim city
- *Zakat* – almsgiving/charitable giving
- *Sawm* – fasting (no food, drink sexual relations) during Ramadan from dawn to sunset, 9th month of Islamic lunar calendar (when Muhammad received the first revelation of the Qur’an)
- *Hajj* – pilgrimage once during lifetime to the Ka’ba in Mecca if have money and physical ability

Muhammad begins his teachings 622 CE. From 7th c. beginnings in Arabia up to 15th c., Islam spreads from Atlantic to Indian Ocean, across steppes of Central Asia as far as Samarqand, to deserts of Africa. Islamic culture absorbs and integrates aspects of other cultures along the way. Preserved much of the knowledge of Greco-Roman tradition, which had been lost to Europe until the Middle Ages. Heyday of Islamic civilization – between collapse of Roman/Byzantine Empires and rise of European nation-states. Islamic lands were center of trade between East and West: silk, textiles, spices, and exquisite art objects.

Characteristics of Islamic Art

- Made for religious practices and settings as well as secular purposes
- Made by and for Islamic peoples of many cultures; incorporates diverse traditions (not art of a specific era, place, or people; Muslims made art for Christians, Jews, and Hindus; Asian and European cultures, and vice versa)
- God is unique and cannot be represented in figural form; humans and animals can only be created by God (prohibition against representing the human form comes out of *interpretation* of Qur’an)
- Lack of narrative in the Qur’an: God is worshipped without intercessors (no saints to depict)

Eventually the lack of figural representation became law. Islamic leaders saw an implication of idolatry in figural imagery: representation ensnares the mind, gives the world a reality it doesn’t possess; abstraction corresponds to a contemplative state where the mind/spirit can roam.

People of the Book: Muslims, Christians, and Jews practice monotheism/belief in one God, who revealed his word to them through the prophets.

Terms

Muslims – “believers”/followers of Islam

Islam – “submission to God”

Muhammad/Mohammed – the Prophet

Qur’an/Koran – “recitation”

Allah – “the one who is God”

Mecca

Medina

hijra/hegira – migration of Muhammad and his followers to Medina in 622 CE (Islamic calendar dates from this event; AH = “after the hijra”)

Hadith – “the sayings of the Prophet”/the teachings of Muhammad; considered a guide to living (not a sacred text)

calligraphy – “beautiful writing”

Reconquista

masjid – mosque

madrassa – school

iwan – vaulted hall or space, walled on three sides, with one end entirely open

qibla wall – mosque wall in direction of Mecca

mihrab – holy space/niche in the qibla wall

minbar – pulpit/throne

minaret – tower for “call to prayer”

muqarnas – nichelike cells

Kashan ware

minai ware

djinn/djoun – spirits

baraka

Jihad: “Holy War” or “struggle”; requires Muslims to defend Islam whenever it is threatened. Jihad is most commonly used to explain violent episodes: Muslims believe that if they are threatened with death they should sacrifice themselves for the sake of Islam, for to do so is a path to heaven. However, jihad also means “struggle” and does not necessarily refer to physical violence; it can refer to one’s inner struggle or the spiritual efforts to further the spread of Islam.

Muhammad: the last of the prophets sent by God to establish and clarify the Islamic faith. Muslims believe that Islam dates back to the creation of the world, before Muhammad was born, but the Islamic religion began historically with the birth of Muhammad in Mecca in 570 CE. Before Muhammad, God sent the prophets Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Noah, David, and Jesus to summon people away from rebellion and sin.

Qur’an/Koran: Muslim holy book. The word of God as revealed/recited by the angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad in 610 CE. Takes about a decade from death of Muhammad to compile the divine revelations into book form. Muslims believe the *Qur’an* had been kept with God since the beginning of time until he revealed it to his Prophet. Each word is believed to be an actual utterance of God. It is not only a source of divine revelation but also a guide to political, social, and cultural matters. This reinforces the concept of Islam not only as a religion, but also a way of life.

Sunni: follower of the *sunnah*, or actions, of Muhammad under the four caliphs (Abu Bakr, known as “best qualified man,” Umar, Uthman, and Ali). Sunnis are the largest group of Muslims and considered to be mainstream traditionalists. After the assassination of Ali, they aggressively expanded the empire and located the capital in Damascus (in present-day Syria).

Shi'ite/Shi'a: *Shi'atu Ali* (party of Ali ibn Abi Talib); believed that the best-qualified caliph was Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, Ali, based on words spoken about him in the Qur'an. After Ali's death, they split off from Sunnis. Shi'ites exalt their leaders, or *Imams*, as divinely inspired to interpret truths of the Qur'an. Their main teacher was Imam Husayn, who was assassinated in 680. They are second-largest group of Muslims.

Sufi: follower of Sufism, Islamic mysticism, which arose at the turn of the seventh century. More a movement than a dogmatic sect. Sufis seek an intense personal relationship with God through chanting, drumming, and ecstatic dancing. Sometimes called “whirling dervishes;” dancing is a way to forget themselves and all worldly things, thereby raising their awareness of God. Sufi orders can be Sunni or Shi'a.