

Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Art: Origins and Ideas

Key Ideas: Religions of the Book

- Monotheistic: one God created and rules the universe (all develop within polytheistic societies)
- Word of God is revealed in writing: Hebrew Scriptures/Bible, Christian Bible, Islamic Qur'an
- Build on beliefs and traditions of one another
- Religious art objects are used for teaching purposes and incorporate elements from other cultures

Origins of Judaism

- Abraham travels to Canaan (c. 1800 BCE), the land promised to God's chosen people.
- God reveals his laws (Ten Commandments) through Moses, which are placed in the Ark of the Covenant (13th c. BCE).
- Twelve tribes unify and build temple in Jerusalem (11th-10th c. BCE).
- After series of conquerors, Israel comes under Roman rule (called Palestine by Romans, 63 BCE).
- Roman emperor Titus destroys Temple (70 CE); period of dispersal into other lands (diaspora).
- Very little art survives from this period; a few wall paintings in Roman catacombs and excavated synagogues (Syria) reveal beliefs and practices.

No Mia works of art from this period

terms/names/places

Yahweh

Abram of Ur (Abraham)

Canaan

Torah

Mount Sinai

Tabernacle

Ark of the Covenant

menorah

house-synagogue of Dura-Europos

catacombs

shofar – ram's horn

lulav – sheaf of palm, myrtle, and willow branches

etrog – citron box

Sukkot – harvest festival

Origins of Christianity

- Jesus Christ, identified as the Messiah by his followers, born into land subject to Roman rule.
- Jesus is descendent of Jewish royal house of David; public ministry is directed toward Jews and Gentiles.
- Follower Paul and other disciples bring Jesus's teachings to surrounding non-Jewish world.
- Christianity "legalized" and becomes Roman state religion by 4th c.
- Early imagery presents Christ as "good shepherd" and commemorates the faithful; later images teach stories from the Bible (story of Jesus told in New Testament Gospels).
- Large churches built on basilica or central plan.

No Mia works of art from this period

terms/names/places

iconography

basilica plan: atrium, narthex, nave, clerestory, apse, transept

central plan

Byzantine Empire

- Western Roman Empire collapses 476 CE (sacked by Germanic peoples).
- Eastern Empire flourishes in 6th c. with capital at Constantinople (formerly Byzantium).
- Extensive use of mosaics (influence of Greek and Roman world) to represent splendor of rulers who preside over church and state.
- Depiction of figures as formal and static within a timeless, supernatural world; rulers take on holy status.
- Muslim Ottoman Turks reclaim Constantinople in 1453, rename it Istanbul. Eastern church leadership moves to Russia.

No Mia works of art from this period

terms/names/places

Emperor Justinian and Empress Theodora

Hagia Sophia/Aya Sofya (Holy Wisdom)

Byzantium/Constantinople/Istanbul

San Vitale, Ravenna

Coptic Christianity

- Christian community founded by apostle Mark in Alexandria, Egypt, around 42-62 CE.
- Coptic world includes Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Christians.
- Modeled on aspects and rituals of ancient Egyptian religion: ankh, ancient Egyptian symbol of eternal life, adopted as their cross; retain resurrection rituals associated with Osiris.
- Christian monasticism, so important to Medieval Europe, had beginnings among the Copts.
- First major theological split in the Christian church over divine/human nature of Christ.
- Arabs conquer Egypt in 7th c., many Copts convert to Islam.

Egypt, *Sanctuary curtain with a Latin cross*, tapestry weave, 5th-6th c. CE 83.126

Egypt, *Textile Fragment*, 2002.192.8

Egypt, *Textile Fragment*, 2002.192.11

Egypt, *Textile Fragment*, 2002.192.14

Egypt, *Coptic Ram*, 5th c. CE 62.53

terms/names/places

ankh

monasticism

Celtic cross

Syrian Christianity

- Saul is converted (takes name Paul) on the road to Damascus in 34 CE; visits Antioch 46-48 CE. Begins at Antioch, leading center of Hellenistic East, with Peter and Paul as its disciples. Jesus's disciples first called Christians here.
- From Antioch spreads to other cities and provinces, among Hellenistic Syrians and Jews.

- School of theology develops 2nd-4th c. at Antioch; monasticism flourishes 4th-5th c. with thousands of monks and ascetics.
- New religion spreads rapidly; at time of Constantine, Syria filled with Christian churches; many church leaders are imprisoned.
- Muslims and Islamic faith come to Syria, 7th-9th c., forced conversions and many churches become mosques.

Syria, *Head of a Young Man*, sandstone, about 400-420 CE, 70.68

Syria, *Stylized Cross*, mosaic, late 4th to mid-5th century 69.78

Syria, *Birds with Foliage*, mosaic, late 4th to mid-5th century 69.49.1

Syria, *Elephant Attacking a Feline*, mosaic, late 4th to mid-5th century 69.49.2

terms/names/places

tesserae

acanthus

Islamic Arts 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.

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.

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

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.

Metalworking (G243)

Hispano-Moorish, *Lion statuette*, 11th-12th c., gold, 72.12

Ceramics (G243)

Iran (Persia), *Plate*, 9th century, earthenware with underglaze brown slip, 68.80.4

Iran (Persia) or Uzbekistan, *Large Bowl*, 10th century, earthenware with a white slip ground under a clear glaze with reddish, dark brown, and gold slip-painted décor, 2003.98.2

Iran (Persia), *Bowl*, 11th-12th c., earthenware with underglaze decor in brown slip on white engobe, Samarkand ware, 50.46.438 (incorrectly labeled as 50.46.435)

Iran or Traxosiana, *Bowl*, 10th-11th century, earthenware with a white slip ground under a clear glaze with reddish and brown slip-painted décor, 2002.89.2

Iraq, *Bowl*, 9th century, earthenware with overglaze cobalt-blue designs, 32.32.3-5

Book Arts: Calligraphy

Iran (Persia), Abbasid dynasty, *Page from the Koran*, 10th c., 51.37.7 (not on view)

Iran (Persia), Abbasid dynasty, *Page from the Koran*, 10th c., 51.37.3 (on view)

terms/names/places

Muslims – “believers”/followers of Islam

Islam – “submission to God”

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)

arabesque – design using rhythmic patterns of scrolling and interlocking foliage, tendrils, or lines; often combined with other elements

muqarnas – nichelike decorative cells used in domes or arches

calligraphy – “beautiful writing”

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. It took about a decade from the 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.