

Support notes for teachers

ESOL workshop: Word in Islamic Art

Introduction

This tour is not an historical journey through the role of writing in Islamic Art, but a way of exploring part of the Middle East collection to produce a decorative record of the visit. To make the most of your visit, try to spend some time in class to discuss some of the following and introduce the vocabulary before your visit

Background information

The term Islamic is used here to define the art and material culture of those lands where the dominant religion is Islam, the religion revealed to the prophet Muhammad in seventh century Arabia. The Islamic lands have encompassed at different times Spain to the west and as far as the Malay world and China to the east.

Islamic Art

Despite regional diversities and changes across time and place, there are a number of defining features of Islamic art: these include the pre-eminent role of Arabic calligraphy; the predominance of geometric and arabesque designs and the absence of figural representation in religious contexts.

The Use of Writing

Arabic is the language in which the Qur'an, the holy book of Muslims, was revealed and it was in the Arabic script that it was written down. Beautiful scripts were developed to copy the Qur'an and then were used in other contexts such as stone inscriptions or ceramic bowls. The script became both a method of communication and decoration.

Before your visit - vocabulary and preparation

Use Explore, an online database of 5000 objects from the Museum's collection to find images of Islamic Art (type in the keyword 'Islamic Art').

Look at the vocabulary below with the following activities to help your students prepare for their visit

pen	ink	note	list	doodle	graffiti
	signature				
	pattern	design	decoration	script	
	calligraphy				
image	icon	representation	geometry		
realistic					
	bowl	lamp	tile	amulet	prayer
	proverb				
Islam	Arabic	Jewish	Hebrew		
	Christian				

Which of these words are nouns and which are adjectives? Can you change any of the words into nouns, adjectives or verbs?

Discuss the following:

- What we write everyday. The purpose of writing for notes, for memory, for information or for decoration
- Using a food packet or drink, you can look at different writing styles, for information and decoration, on everyday objects
- The importance of design on sacred and secular objects
- The different languages people use for communication and prayer.
- The protective power of words
- The value of sacred texts in some faiths, especially the role of the Qu’ran, Torah and Bible, and the use of human representation in connection to these texts