



Image from: [Detail of decorative tiles at Isfahan, Iran. in Need to Know? Islam](#)

### Summary Article: **Islamic art**

From *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

Art and design of the Muslim world, dating from the foundation of the Islamic faith in the 7th century AD. Having developed few artistic traditions of their own, the Muslim Arabs who conquered parts of Asia, Europe, and North Africa in the late 7th and early 8th centuries adopted elements of Byzantine, Coptic, and Persian art, fusing them into a distinctive decorative style based on calligraphy. The traditions laid down by Islam created devout, painstaking craftspeople whose creative purpose was the glory of God. Islamic doctrine controlled all artistic endeavour, whether calligraphy, the decorative arts, or representational art. Sculpture was prohibited and carvers turned instead to exquisite inlay and fretwork, notably on doors and screens, in Islamic monuments such as the Alhambra Palace, Granada, Spain, and the Taj Mahal, India. Today, Islamic art is to be found predominately in Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, the Indian subcontinent, and the Central Asian republics.

**Calligraphy** The Koran, the sacred book of Islam, is believed by Muslims to contain the word of Allah (Arabic 'the God') as it was divinely revealed to the prophet Muhammad. The script of the Koran is believed not only to convey the message of Allah, but also to reflect the beauty and glory of God. Calligraphy is, therefore, regarded as the highest of all arts, and the Arabic letters and forms soon became central to decoration on ceramics, textiles, metalwork, and architecture. Scripts ranged in style from the cursive *Naskh* with its extended flourishes, spirals, and curves, to the angular *Kufic*. According to Islamic tradition, only the most pure, those devoted to and inspired by God, could write the scripts.

Other designs developed from calligraphy, and interlacing patterns based on geometry and stylized plant motifs (including the swirling arabesque) typically framed and enhanced the lettering. Geometric forms were linked directly to Islam, as they were thought to symbolize the divine order of the universe. A geometric design was believed to help humans understand God's true nature, and Islamic geometric patterns usually include one error to remind the Muslim that only Allah is absolutely perfect.

**Decorative arts** Most Islamic art is non-figurative as the traditions of Islam discourage the representation of people. Crafts and their decoration are painstakingly created as an act of devotion.

Islamic textiles, notably those of the Fatimid period, include silk brocades, weavings, and carpets of an unprecedented fineness and beauty produced for use as floor coverings and wall hangings. Many of the designs feature traditional Arab motifs and geometric patterns. Turkish *ushak* medallion carpets were exported to Europe in the 16th century, and feature in many Renaissance paintings, adorning floors, walls, desks, and tables. Prayer rugs continue to be the most skilfully woven textiles. Their design is usually based on the arch in the mosque that marks the direction of the holy city of Mecca.

Other examples of decorative arts include items of metalwork, which were often ornamented with minute attention to detail, involving intricate inlays and overlays of precious metals such as gold and silver.

Ceramics was another, well-established area of the Islamic decorative arts. Muslim potters drew on

styles and techniques from China, but also devised their own, often coloured, lustres and glazes. Pots and bowls began to feature the geometric patterns and calligraphic designs popular in other areas of Islamic art. In particular, beautiful intricate ceramic tiles were made for the elaborate decoration of mosques, just as stained-glass windows were used in Europe to adorn churches and cathedrals. The mosaics involved extremely complex, mathematical designs that were particularly difficult to execute where they covered the curved frames of arches and ceilings.

In the 11th and 12th centuries Turkish Seljuk pottery was noted for its particularly lively designs. In the 16th century Iznik in Turkey became an important pottery and ceramics centre, producing beautiful wares decorated typically with blue plant forms against a white ground, as well as glazed, coloured tilework for mosque decoration.

**Representational art** Islam did not directly forbid representational, figurative art, but there is no religious tradition governing it as there is with calligraphy and the more geometric decorative arts. Islamic figurative art is generally secular (separated from religion).

Representational examples of Islamic art often illustrate battles or animal hunts, and were used to decorate the private apartments of the nobility. From the 13th century a strong tradition of miniature painting developed among courtly society, which was originally inspired by ivory carvings from Fatimid Egypt (AD 969–1171). Manuscripts were also illuminated (decorated), with great emphasis being placed on the use of flat colour and clearly outlined illustrations, rather than three-dimensional figures. During the Timurid dynasty (15th century) and Safavid dynasty (1502–1736), pictorial art flourished. One of the most celebrated artists from the Herat school of this period was Bihzad, who decorated various legends and books of poetry. Leading painters working in Tabriz in the first half of the 16th century included Mir Sayyid Ali, Aqu Mirak, Mirza Ali, and Sultan Muhammed. The skills of the Tabriz school were later transferred to India by the third Mogul emperor Akbar the Great (see Indian art).

#### **weblinks**

Detroit Institute of Arts – Permanent Collection

**APA**

Chicago

Harvard

MLA

---

Islamic art. (2018). In Helicon (Ed.), *The Hutchinson unabridged encyclopedia with atlas and weather guide*. Abington, UK: Helicon. Retrieved from [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/islamic\\_art](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/islamic_art)

---



© RM, 2018. All rights reserved.



© RM, 2018. All rights reserved.

## APA

Islamic art. (2018). In Helicon (Ed.), *The Hutchinson unabridged encyclopedia with atlas and weather guide*. Abington, UK: Helicon. Retrieved from [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/islamic\\_art](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/islamic_art)

## Chicago

"Islamic art." In *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*, edited by Helicon. Helicon, 2018. [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/islamic\\_art](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/islamic_art)

## Harvard

Islamic art. (2018). In Helicon (Ed.), *The Hutchinson unabridged encyclopedia with atlas and weather guide*. [Online]. Abington: Helicon. Available from: [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/islamic\\_art](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/islamic_art) [Accessed 23 October 2019].

## MLA

"Islamic art." *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*, edited by Helicon, 2018. *Credo Reference*, [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/islamic\\_art](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/islamic_art). Accessed 23 Oct. 2019.