

ISLAMIC CALLIGRAPHY

UMAYYAD DYNASTY

MONUMENTS AND ARTIFACTS IN DAMASCUS

GROUP H3

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Significance of calligraphy in the Umayyad Dynasty and how it influenced art forms on various objects in the area

Termed as the “formative period” by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Umayyad dynasty brought forward a series of contemporary ideas that transformed the definition of Islamic art.

While during the emergence of Islam, artists continued to work within their “classical naturalistic traditions” (influenced by the eastern shores of the Mediterranean), overtime, new techniques and conventions were taken upon by the artists to differentiate their art from that of earlier times. Artists of the Umayyad dynasty formulated and gave rise to a unique sense of artistic expression; this birth of a new way to look at Islamic art became wildly popular after the downfall of the Umayyad dynasty. A major area of focus of art in the Umayyad dynasty was that of architecture. Contrary to tradition, the Umayyads practised a novel approach to using their space, in that they would construct on areas that held historical significance. Notable architectural monuments from the era are the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, the enlarged mosque in Madinah, the mosques of Damascus, and the former residence of the Prophet.

The Umayyads used common day objects to revolutionise the way Islamic art was portrayed. The fifth Umayyad Caliph, Abd al Malik, used calligraphy on coins to represent Islamic values. Previously, the coins displayed figural imagery such as that of standing caliphs etc. Under the caliph, coins were imprinted with religious inscriptions, the date and the mint’s location. This change from the convention deemed very significant as it meant there was now a single unified currency for all; this greatly helped the empire to facilitate trade.

In terms of architecture, as Muslims took over developed cities, they converted places of worship willfully abandoned by people of other religions into mosques and shelters. In Damascus, a church named after St. John the Baptist was converted into a public space, while the same was done to a Jewish temple built by Herod the Great in Jerusalem. There is also archeological evidence of a Zoroastrian temple and other religious compounds being converted into mosques in Syria and Iran.

However, the most significant improvements in Islamic architecture took place under the reign of the Umayyad Prince Al Walid - I as three major mosques were constructed in different cities: Medinah, the city in which the first Muslim state originated; Jerusalem, the city that was mutually significant for Jews, Christians and Muslims; and Damascus, the early city that was now set to be the capital of the new Muslim State. The Umayyad Mosque in Damascus is 330 feet long and 515 feet wide and is considered the fourth most holiest place in the world. The Al Aqsa Mosque of Jerusalem is thought to have had as many as 15 naves parallel to each other.

The designs and construction of these mosques is quite significant. They were all made as hypostyle mosques in order to serve the new state's need for centralization. They also exhibited unique symbolic elements such as the ornately decorated Mihrab (ie. a niche in the Qibla wall). Mihrabs are still included in modern day mosques to honour Prophet Muhammad as the first Imam. The former Roman building in Damascus had tall towers which, after the establishment of the Umayyad Mosque, acted as the first minarets ever to be used to call Azaan and to represent Islam for distant viewers. Moreover, all three mosques were aesthetically decorated with great complexity using marble, mosaics and woodwork, making the buildings literary works of art.

Visual 1: Silver Coin of Umar II



This is a Silver dirham from the reign of Umar II (r. 717 - 720 CE). Minted c. 718/719 CE. Basra, Iraq. Caliph Umar was the first ruler who issued coins in Islamic history. The calligraphy used in all the legends on both sides of this dirham is Kufi. These coins were used in the medium of trade. When a new caliph came in power, he had a new coin struck in his name to make the change of the rule official. Through the study of coins and its inscriptions, important Islamic historical events could be traced back with a certain amount of accuracy. The coin specs are as follows:

Item : Dirham of Caliph Umar Abdul Aziz

Obverse Field:

لا اله الا الله وحده لا شريك له

There is no deity except (the one) God alone. He has no equal

Obverse Margin:

بسم الله ضرب هذا الدرهم بالبصرة سنة مئة

In the name of God. This Dirham was struck in Al Basrah in the year one hundred

Reverse Field:

الله احد الله الصمد لم يلد ولم يولد له كفوا احد

God is One God. The eternal and indivisible, who has not begotten, and has not been begotten and never is there His equal

Reverse Margin:

محمد رسول الله ارسله بالهدى ودين الحق ليظهره على الدين كله ولو كره المشركون

Muhammad is the messenger of God. He sent him with guidance and the true religion to reveal it to all religions even if the polytheists abhor it.

Visual 2: Pyxis of al-Mughira



Pyxis of al-Mughira, possibly from Madinat al-Zahra, AH 357/ 968 CE, carved ivory with traces of jade, 16cm x 11.8 cm (Musée du Louvre, Paris), photo: Steven Zucker (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0).

The Pyxis of al-Mughira is decorated with four eight-lobed medallions which are surrounded by figures and animals that include falconers, wrestlers, griffons, peacocks, birds, goats and animals to be hunted. Each medallion has princely iconography. This medallion (left) shows two men collecting eggs from the nests of Falcons, a symbol of Umayyad legitimacy. An Arabic inscription in the kufic script runs around the base of the lid and reads: "God's blessing, favours, joy, beatitude to al-Mughira son of the Commander of the faithful, may God have mercy upon him, in the year 357." Islamic art is not strictly speaking aniconic (aniconic = the absence of human figures). Human and animal figures played a vital part in iconography. We see them here in this pyxis, which some scholars (including those at the Louvre), have interpreted as expressing the political authority and legitimacy of Umayyad Caliphs (as opposed to the Abbasid Caliphs, who ruled in Baghdad).

Visual 3: Parchment leaf of Koran written in early Kufic



Parchment leaf from a Koran written in early *Kufi*, Syria; 1st half of 8th century.

Size: 46.5 × 39.9 cm

The script on this leaf from an early Koran with a vertical format is a precursor of *Kufi* calligraphy, which was to be the dominant type used for Korans in the 9th century. Almost none of the diacritical marks are found here that were later commonly used to distinguish among consonants and to denote vowels. The leaf (both sides) contains the verses from the end of *sura* 90 to the beginning of *sura* 93, and the individual chapters are separated by ornamented, colored bars extending from margin to margin. Different kinds of markers were inserted between each fifth and each tenth verse. The earliest Qur'ans were written in the *hijazi* script, a script that predates kufic. This script is characterized by the rightward sloping of the tall shafts of the letters. The calligraphy style kufic, so named after its origins in the city of Kufa in present-day Iraq, is characterized by more static and angular upright letters that were well suited to writing on parchment as well as to use in architecture and decorative objects. Such ancient artifacts give insight into how kufic script evolved in today's century, from being a simple angular script to an ornamented one.

Visual 4: The Eye: Greco-Roman Encyclopedia



The eye, according to Hunain ibn Ishaq: Scholars developed large encyclopedias of medical knowledge during the Islamic Golden Age, such as this one from a manuscript dated circa 1200. Medicine was a central part of medieval Islamic culture. Responding to circumstances of time and place, Islamic physicians and scholars developed a large and complex medical literature exploring and synthesizing the theory and practice of medicine. Islamic medicine was built on tradition, chiefly the theoretical and practical knowledge developed in India, Greece, Persia, and Rome. Islamic scholars translated their writings from Syriac, Greek, and Sanskrit into Arabic and then produced new medical knowledge based on those texts. In order to make the Greek tradition more accessible, understandable, and teachable, Islamic scholars organized the Greco-Roman medical knowledge into encyclopedias. Such encyclopedias give the idea of the way medieval Islamic world especially in umayyad caliphate in Spain catered the profession of medicine and found ways to cure a disease.

Visual 5: Quranic Inscription on the mihrab of The Great Mosque of Cordoba



Great Mosque of Cordoba. Detail of the mosaic decoration on the mihrab façade.

Mosaics, colour, and light contribute decisively to emphasising the area of the *maqṣūra*, which was the scenario where the sovereign displayed himself. Light is a divine attribute; it is the symbol of intellect and justice against chaos and darkness. Colour and word, according to the thinker Ibn Ḥazm (384–465/994–1064), are the light providing access to the world, to ideas, to revelation and, of course, to beauty in all its facets: physical, ethical, and spiritual. Luminosity and a harmonious combination of colours create beauty according to Islamic aesthetics. Precious stones or gold combine these two facets and are essential components of this symbolism. Along the same lines, the recent studies by Alain highlight the use of colours and gold in the monumental epigraphy of the Umayyads and in the chrysography of the early Qurans. The brightness of the gilded letters and precious stones against a dark blue or red background has both a royal or imperial connotation and a sacred meaning: the divine light in the darkness, light as a guide (*hudā*), a rather frequent tenet in the Quran.

Visual 6: An Early Umayyad Papyrus Invitation for the Ḥajj



Date: 86-99 AH / 705-717 CE.

Features: It has Arabic text. The place of discovery of this document is probably Egypt.

Contents: Side A

1. In the name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful,
2. from Sahl bin ‘Abd al-Azīz to
3. ‘U]qba bin Muslim. Peace be upon you
4. and I thank for your sake God besides Whom
5. there is no] god but He.
6. Now then, I have mentioned the pilgrimage (*Ḥajj*).
7. The commander of the believers has proclaimed it to the people
8. and he has exhorted (them) to it.
9. So if you are able to go out with me, then do so,
10. for, [i]f you want to do [.....]
11. this, God willing. Go out to me with my riding camels

12. and do not oblige yourself to anything besides the rental costs of a camel.
13. Peace be upon you and the mercy of God.

Side B :From Sahl b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, to ‘Uqba b. Muslim

Details:

This letter, written on papyrus, was found in Egypt, where both men were probably living at the time it was sent. Sahl bin ‘Abd al-‘Azīz wrote a letter to ‘Uqba b. Muslim, conveying a message from the *amīr al-mu‘minīn*, the caliph. The caliph had announced that the time had come to make the *Ḥajj*, and had exhorted all Muslims to do so. Sahl b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz can be identified as a son of the governor of Egypt, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. Marwān (in office 65–86 AH / 684–705 CE). The recipient of the above letter is most likely ‘Uqba b. Muslim al-Tujibī (died. c. 120 AH / 737 CE), who was appointed deputy governor of Fustāṭ when the governor of Egypt, Ḥanzala b. Ṣafwān (in office 102–105 AH / 720–723 CE), temporarily moved to Alexandria in 103 AH / 721 CE. Furthermore, ‘Uqba b. Muslim is a well-known narrator of *ḥadīth* whilst Sahl b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz has transmitted some of them as well.

After conducting historical analysis, Sijpesteijn concluded the date for the composition of this letter between the death of Egypt’s governor ‘Abd al-‘Azīz in 86 AH / 705 CE and Sahl b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz’s move to Damascus in 99 AH / 717 CE to join his brother, caliph ‘Umar II. Sahl b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz died in 99 AH / 717 CE in Damascus and this serves as a *terminus ante quem* for the letter.

Sijpesteijn asserts this papyrus is "the earliest documentary evidence for the *ḥajj* currently known", suggesting the next earliest occurrence is from an unpublished papyrus document most likely from the 2nd century AH / 8th century CE. Sijpesteijn is perhaps unaware that al-Kilabi has published a near contemporaneous inscription from 91 AH / 710 CE that mentions the *Ḥajj* as well. Furthermore, there also exists an earlier mention of the *Ḥajj* that comes from an inscription dated 82 AH / 701-702 CE on the Darb Zubayda pilgrimage route.

Works Cited

“Early Period: the Umayyad and ‘Abbāsīd Dynasties.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.,
www.britannica.com/topic/Islamic-arts/Early-period-the-Umayyad-and-Abbasid-dynasties.

This source provides a detailed analysis regarding the differences in terms of art forms and styles and calligraphic variations between the umayyad and the abbasids dynasty. It helped in giving insight about how and where the umayyads' art and architecture was different from the other dynasties.

Hays, Jeffrey. *UMAYYAD (A.D. 661–750) ART AND ARCHITECTURE*.
factsanddetails.com/world/cat55/3sub2/entry-5829.html.

This source gives a detailed description on the art and architecture of the Umayyad dynasty. It focuses on the main monumental art that was built and maintained under this dynasty. It helped in providing sufficient information needed regarding the artistic nature of the umayyads.

“The Umayyads (661–749 C.E.) (Article).” *Khan Academy*, Khan Academy,
www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-islam/chronological-periods-islamic/islamic-art-early/a/the-umayyads-661749-ce.

This source helped in providing the timeline of the objects and artifacts of art and calligraphy under the reign of umayyads. It also illustrated the reason why an artifact, whether a mosque or a coin, was created and what changes it went through (if any) in the subsequent years.