

Ceramics, Textiles and Calligraphy

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Because the representations of human figures and animals in Islamic art is generally not allowed, artists used other techniques to express meaning in their artwork. Small objects and textiles both became very important to Islamic artists and Islamic culture. Ceramics, textiles, and calligraphy were more abundant than painting and sculpture, and these served as ways for artists to make their marks. This lesson covers:

1. [Time Period and Location: Islamic Ceramics](#)
2. [Small Objects and Calligraphy](#)
3. [Bowl with Kufic Border](#)
4. [Macy Jug](#)



BIG IDEA

With the absence of figural representation in Islamic art, production of ceramics, textiles, and calligraphy became major outlets for artistic expression.

1. Time Period and Location: Islamic Ceramics

This lesson covers examples of art from the 11th century to the early part of the 13th century. The works of art in this lesson come from within modern day Iran.

2. Small Objects and Calligraphy

It is important to remember that art historians invented the concept of Islamic art in the 19th century. The period that we are looking at lasted approximately 1,300 years and extended from China to Spain, so there is no monolithic style associated with Islamic art. In addition, Muslims tended not to produce sculpture and paintings in the same way that we understand them in the West. Instead, they made decorative arts, or objects that had a practical everyday function but also were very beautiful. Many of the groups of people who practiced Islam were originally nomadic, and small but lavish objects were easy for them to transport.

With these small objects, the edict against producing images of animals and people did not carry as much weight. Since they were for personal use and had a practical function, there was little possibility of idolatry. This situation was much different for any sort of decoration included inside of a mosque. In addition, Shi'ite Muslims were more flexible regarding this issue than Sunnis, so there were more illustrations and images of people in illuminated manuscripts from Persia, for instance, where Shi'ite Islam was more dominant.



DID YOU KNOW

The production of textiles is also deeply rooted in the culture of Islam. These are canvases for the display of beautiful arabesque patterns, and they are of particular importance in their use as prayer rugs. In the absence of representational art, calligraphy became one of the primary forms of artistic expression.



DID YOU KNOW

Calligraphy in Islam is symbolically a very important art form, particularly the **Kufic script**, which was used to record the first copies of the Qur'an. It is a type of simplified writing that was designed to be easily written in manuscripts and on ceramics and other objects. The strokes that comprise the writing are of uniform thickness and have a strong vertical and horizontal emphasis. Below is a page from the Quran written in Kufic script:



Folio from the Quran written in Kufic script
8th–9th century



TERM TO KNOW

Kufic Script

Oldest form of calligraphy; the first copies of the Qur'an were written in Kufic script.

3. Bowl with Kufic Border

Below is an example of calligraphy used as decorative enhancement. It decorates buildings, textiles, and everyday objects, emphasizing the importance of writing and of Islam as one of the faiths, along with Christianity and Judaism, that emphasizes the importance of religious text. Muslims thought that the creation of letters paralleled God's creation.

This bowl was made in a style that we refer to as **Samarkand ware**. It consists of a white or light-colored slip onto which dark lettering has been painted. A slip is a mixture of clay and other chemicals painted onto the surface of a ceramic in order to provide a thin layer of color, known as a glaze, or more opaque color. Samarkand is a province and also the capital city of Uzbekistan. The inscription on this bowl reads, "Knowledge: The beginning of it is bitter to taste, but the end is sweeter than honey."



Bowl with Kufic border

Iran

11–12th century CE



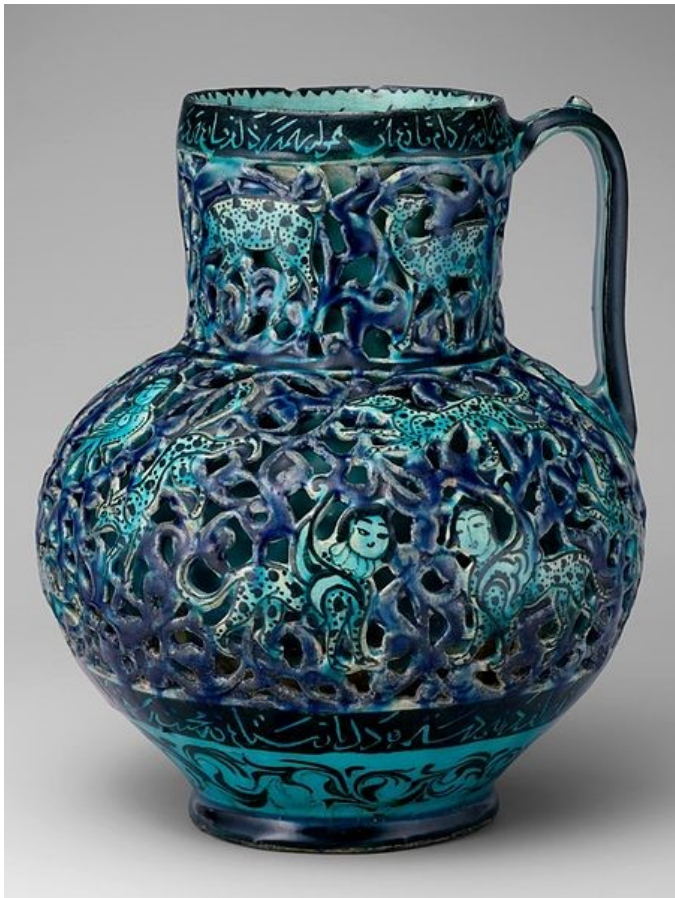
TERM TO KNOW

Samarkand Ware

An Islamic ceramic style characterized by dark letters on a white or light-colored background.

4. Macy Jug

Another type of ceramic work is called **lusterware**, which involves the application of a slip that creates a shimmering, iridescent glaze on top of rich, deep colors. Here is an example of a small jug about eight inches tall.



Macy Jug
Iran
Early 13th century

This jug is a striking example from the early 13th century. Notice the two layers: a solid inner layer that holds the liquid, and an open, decorative, outer layer that depicts harpies, sphinxes, and quadrupeds, or four-legged animals. Encircling the bottom in a very small, lighter blue band, is a love poem written by an anonymous poet.

TERM TO KNOW

Lusterware

Middle Eastern in origin, a type of pottery decorated with glassy, metallic lusters.

SUMMARY

During the **time period and location of Islamic ceramics**, many representations of figures in Islamic art were not allowed. This meant that artists showed meaning in their artwork using other techniques. **Small objects and calligraphy**, as well as other textiles, became very important to the Islamic culture.

In this lesson, you looked at two examples of Islamic artwork from this period: a **bowl with Kufic border** and the **Macy Jug**. The first piece of artwork was calligraphy used as decorative enhancement, and the last was an example of lusterware.

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TERMS TO KNOW

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