

# Islamic Art

by Sophia

## WHAT'S COVERED

The origin of Islam can be traced back to a religious prophet, Muhammad. The basic history and tenets of Islam are important when attempting to understand why Islamic art is aniconic. This lesson explores:

1. [Time Period and Location: Islamic Art](#)
2. [Basic Tenets of Islam](#)
3. [Rise of Islam](#)
4. [Aniconism in Islamic Art](#)



### BIG IDEA

Islam traces its origin to the divine revelations of Muhammad, a religious prophet, and shares a religious ancestry with Judaism and Christianity.

## 1. Time Period and Location: Islamic Art

The religious prophet **Muhammad** was born in Arabia in 570 CE in the city of Mecca. His revelations from God are said to have begun in 610 CE. The beginning of **Islam** is in 622 CE, marked by the migration of Muhammad and his followers to the city of Medina to escape persecution. Muhammad died in 632 CE, but his religion endured and today is the second largest religion in the world after Christianity. During the 8th century, Islam moved into parts of Asia, including Kazakhstan, western China, Indonesia, and Malaysia, and gradually became increasingly important in those regions. By the 15th–16th century, Islam was the dominant religion in these areas.

Adherence to the faith of Islam can be found all over the world today. However, in the late 15th century, the Islamic world covered approximately the area overlaid in green on the map shown here:



Included in this area, which is considered the Islamic world, are:

- Northern Africa
- Parts of Eastern Africa (including modern-day Somalia)

- Spain
- Eastern portions of Europe
- Parts of the former Soviet Union (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan) and Russia (Chechnya, Dagestan, etc.)
- The entire Middle East
- Western China
- The majority of India
- Indonesia and Malaysia



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Muhammad**

In Islam, the prophet and messenger of Allah.

##### **Islam**

The religious faith of Muslims, with the basic principle of absolute submission to Allah.

## 2. Basic Tenets of Islam

Islam was an extremely influential religion, and it remains so today. This religion dictates religious and secular laws for its adherents, and five pillars of Islam make up the basic tenets of the religion:

- Declaration of faith (there is one God, **Allah**, and Muhammad is his chosen prophet)
- Prayers (five specific prayers said daily while facing Mecca)
- Alms-giving (giving to the poor)
- Fasting
- Pilgrimage to Mecca (if physically and financially able to)

Compared to Christianity and Judaism, there is little or no hierarchy in Islam. There are no religious leaders, such as rabbis and priests, who intercede on behalf of the people. There is simply an imam, who leads prayer, and caliphs, who were both religious and political leaders, especially in the Ottoman Empire, until Atatürk abolished them in 1924. This quality is present in many mosques, which often consist of large spaces that are enclosed for the purpose of allowing a large number of people to worship together in one space.

Eventually, a split developed in Islam between those who believed that only people directly descended from Muhammad should be caliphs (Shi'ite Muslims) and those who recognized caliphs not descended from Muhammad (Sunni Muslims). This split has persisted until today.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### **Allah**

In Islam, God, the Supreme Being.

## 3. Rise of Islam

The rise of Islam begins with Muhammad, who was born in Arabia in 570 CE. At the time of his birth, this region was predominantly religiously polytheistic. Muslims believe that Muhammad received revelations from God beginning in 610 CE. This is believed to be the same time that he began to preach, gaining a modest following.

When he was persecuted because of his beliefs, he fled the city with his followers, eventually settling north of Mecca in the city of Medina. During this time, his following grew, and he returned eight years later to Mecca with 10,000 soldiers to control the city and convert the people to Islam.

The Koran (or Qur'an) is the sacred text of Islam. It is essentially a codification of the sacred revelations and laws of Islam. The spread of Islam was twofold, spreading person to person and then politically as the conquest of new lands by Islamic civilization, such as the Ottoman Turks, expanded the religion to the parts of the world under their authority.

The page shown below is from the Koran and is written in Kufic script. The letters are very big because the pages of the Koran were often meant to be read by a group of people. The letters also have this aesthetic appeal of their own. An important aspect of Islamic art is calligraphy, or fine writing, and the beauty of writing, its visual aspect, and transforming that into an aspect of the work of art in and of itself. Many buildings and artistic objects in the Islamic tradition actually have lettering and inscriptions on them.



Page from the Koran written in Kufic script

8th–9th century

Ink and color on parchment

## 4. Aniconism in Islamic Art

The art of Islam is **aniconic**, meaning there are no icons allowed, a distinct contrast to Christian art. Islamic art is dominated by absolutely beautiful geometric patterns and motifs. You won't find anything like the Christian iconography or images we've already looked at. In fact, images of sentient beings, such as people and animals, are forbidden under certain circumstances, including as part of the interior and exterior decorations of mosques. Small household objects, such as jugs and ewers, might be in the shape of animals. Miniature painting, which consists of small images in manuscripts, does contain images of people and occasionally of Muhammad as instructional illustrations of scenes from his life. In these cases, the face and sometimes the entire body of Muhammad will be left blank, but not always. Since these objects were small, made for private use, and the level of naturalism was low, the risk of idolatry was low. In addition, Shi'ite Muslims allowed slightly more flexibility in the use of images than Sunni did.



### DID YOU KNOW

The idea that figural representation should be forbidden is not actually present in the Quran, but rather in the Hadith, or sayings attributed to Muhammad. The belief is that only God is the “maker of forms” and that humans should not attempt to imitate him. In this regard, Islam shares ideas in common with Judaism, which also has banned religious imagery, with a few exceptions, such as the synagogue at Dura-Europos.

Being in proximity to Byzantium undoubtedly influenced the Islamic civilizations. The Christian church's struggles with the veneration of images would have likely reinforced the original argument in Islam against the use of images.

Below is the Dome of the Rock, which is one of the earliest works of architecture in the Islamic tradition. The Caliph al-Walid wanted to build a mosque at the site of the Temple Mount. This was an area in Jerusalem that was sacred to Christians, Jews, and Muslims as the place where Abraham had attempted to sacrifice his son Isaac, the site where Solomon built the temple that housed the Ark of the Covenant, and the place where Muhammad ascended to heaven during his night journey. This became the location of the earliest surviving work of Muslim architecture, the Dome of the Rock. It is not a mosque, but rather a shrine to house the holy rock where so many sacred events had taken place. Underneath it is a cave and an underground spring, making the location quite auspicious in terms of its natural terrain.

The Dome of the Rock has very elaborate tilework on the exterior. There is also an inscription in Arabic across the top edge of the exterior that cites the Surah Ya-Sin, or the 36th chapter of the Quran. This is the first of many instances of writing being used as a form of imagery in sacred Islamic architecture. On the interior, there are mosaics influenced by the Byzantine tradition. In fact, Byzantine artisans created and installed the tilework. Looking closely, many of the designs incorporate the **arabesque**, or the curving lines that Islamic art is known for. This is also an example of aniconic art.



The Dome of the Rock  
Jerusalem  
687–692 CE

#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### Aniconic

Not allowing images or idols.

##### Arabesque

A spiraling or serpentine line or motif.

#### SUMMARY

Muhammad, a religious prophet, is responsible for the **rise of Islam**. To help you understand this idea in more detail, this lesson covered the **time period and location of Islamic art**.

Furthermore, the **basic tenets of Islam** were explored. Remember, these are a declaration of faith, prayers, alms-giving, fasting, and pilgrimage to Mecca.

Finally, you learned about Islamic art and why it is **aniconic**, meaning there are no icons allowed. This stems back to the connections Islam has with Judaism and Christianity, because all three of these religions trace their lineages back to Abraham and the law of Moses that forbids idolatry. Even images of Allah and Muhammad are forbidden in art from this time.

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#### TERMS TO KNOW

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##### Islam

The religious faith of Muslims, with the basic principle of absolute submission to Allah.

##### Muhammad

In Islam, the prophet and messenger of Allah.