

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:



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 AD in the city of Mecca. His revelations from God are said to have begun in 610 AD. The beginning of **Islam** is in 622 AD, marked by the migration of Muhammad and his followers to the city of Medina to escape persecution. Muhammad died in 632 AD, but his religion endured and today is the second largest religion in the world after Christianity.

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 Sahara
- Parts of Eastern Africa (including modern-day Somalia)
- Spain
- Eastern portions of Europe
- The entire Middle East
- The majority of India



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)



TERMS 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 AD. At the time of his birth, this region was predominantly religiously polytheistic. Muslims believe that Muhammad received revelations from God beginning in 610 AD. 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. Aniconic

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 Allah and Muhammad are strictly forbidden.



DID YOU KNOW

Images of Allah and Muhammad are forbidden because of Islam's connection with Judaism and Christianity. All three Abrahamic religions trace the lineage of their faiths back to and through the prophet Abraham. All three religions take their ban on idolatry from the law of Moses. The forbiddance of idolatry in the veneration of images became murky water for Christians and was the underlying issue that spurred the iconoclasm of the eighth and ninth centuries. Muslims interpret this law as forbidding the use of figures in their religious art, including and especially images of Allah or Muhammad.

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. It has

very elaborate tilework on the exterior. On the interior, it has mosaics that are influenced by the Byzantine tradition. 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

687-692 AD

Jerusalem



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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Not allowing images, or idols.

Arabesque

A spiraling or serpentine line or motif.

Islam

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

Muhammad

In Islam, the prophet and messenger of Allah.