



What is Islamic art?



What do we actually mean by Islamic art?

A central feature of Islamic art is its emphasis on craftsmanship. Creating a high quality object – something that is a delight to behold – is much more important than producing something new and innovative. Another characteristic of Islamic art is that it does not necessarily tell us anything about the artist's personal ideas or feelings. Islamic artists and craftsmen often focus on a long, tried-and-true tradition.

What is most important is creating something beautiful and well made, often something with a practical use. In other words, Islamic art largely aims at beautifying everyday life and making utilitarian objects into works of art.

Then what does “Islamic” have to do with it?

At the David Collection, we generally define Islamic art as works of art produced in the part of the world where the religion of Islam has played a dominant role for a long period of time. They do not necessarily have to be works of art made by or for Muslims. The artists might also be followers of another religion, for example Christians or Jews. And the message conveyed by their art does not have to directly reflect the religion of Islam. It can also have a purely secular character.

DURING THE GUIDED TOUR OF THE MUSEUM:

When pupils are shown around the museum, the guide will focus on a number of common features of Islamic art: vegetal ornamentation, geometric patterns, calligraphy, and the stylized depiction of reality. Historical aspects will also be dealt with and, depending on the work of art, an object's function and relevant cultural and historical aspects will be discussed.



Good questions – and answers

Is it true that living creatures may not be depicted in Islamic art?

No, it is not true. Pictures of living creatures may not be found in the Koran or in mosques, but otherwise pictures of animals and people may certainly be used. The reason why such depictions are not used in the Koran or religious buildings was from the very beginning to avoid idolatry and to free artists from the temptation of emulating God's creative force. In general, Islamic art also tends to depict motifs in a very stylized or abstract manner.

Is Islamic art religious art?

Yes and no. While quotations from the Koran are often used in architecture and on various works of art, rarely is a specific visual symbolism related to the religion. Islamic art as a whole is generally too abstract to enable the beholder to read a clear message into it. There is a great deal of Islamic art that has a completely secular character.

What are typical features of Islamic art?

Especially typical features of Islamic art are the refined vegetal ornamentation (arabesques), geometric patterns, and Arabic calligraphy. In addition, there are often stylized or abstract depictions of reality. All four of these elements are frequently used in the same work of art. Another characteristic feature of Islamic art is that many motifs and patterns are found in a wide variety of different types of materials. Metal work is copied in ceramics, textile decorations are found in architecture, etc. This creates an unusual uniformity.

Is there modern Islamic art?

Yes, there are many modern artists and works of art in the Islamic world, where calligraphy, in particular, plays an important role. The youngest Islamic works of art in the David Collection, however, are from the middle of the 19th century. Since the beginning of the 20th century, many regional trends in art have as a whole lost their distinctiveness and become internationalized, including those in the Islamic world.