

Calligraphy in Islamic Art



Bowl with Arabic Inscription



Mirror



Section of a Qur'an Manuscript
by Umar Aqta'

By Department of Islamic Art

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Calligraphy is the most highly regarded and most fundamental element of Islamic art . It is significant that the Qur'an , the book of God's revelations to the Prophet Muhammad , was transmitted in Arabic, and that inherent within the Arabic script is the potential for developing a variety of ornamental forms. The employment of calligraphy as ornament had a definite aesthetic appeal but

often also included an underlying talismanic component. While most works of art had legible inscriptions, not all Muslims would have been able to read them.

One should always keep in mind, however, that calligraphy is principally a means to transmit a text, albeit in a decorative form.

Objects from different periods and regions vary in the use of calligraphy in their overall design, demonstrating the creative possibilities of calligraphy as ornament. In some cases, calligraphy is the dominant element in the decoration. In these examples, the artist exploits the inherent possibilities of the Arabic script to create writing as ornament. An entire word can give the impression of random brushstrokes, or a single letter can develop into a decorative knot. In other cases, highly esteemed calligraphic works on paper are themselves ornamented and enhanced by their decorative frames or backgrounds. Calligraphy can also become part of an overall ornamental program, clearly separated from the rest of the decoration. In some examples, calligraphy can be combined with vegetal scrolls on the same surface, though often on different levels, creating an interplay of decorative elements.

Citation

Department of Islamic Art. "Calligraphy in Islamic Art." In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–.
http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/cali/hd_cali.htm (October 2001)

Further Reading

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Grabar, Oleg. *The Mediation of Ornament*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.

Additional Essays by Department of Islamic Art

Department of Islamic Art. "The Art of the Umayyad Period in Spain (711–1031)." (October 2001)

Department of Islamic Art. "The Art of the Nasrid Period (1232–1492)." (October 2002)

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