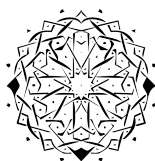
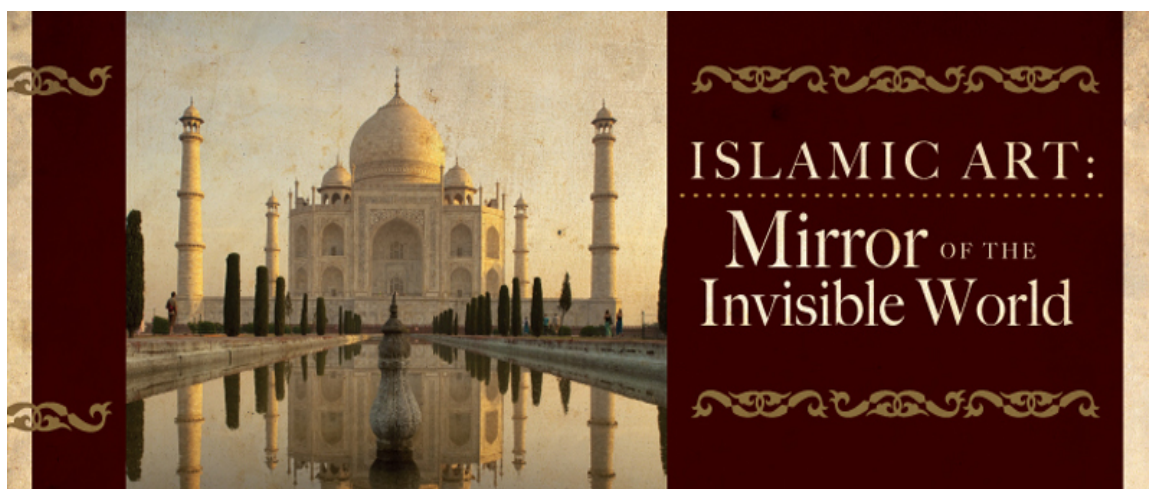


Islamic Art: Mirror of the Invisible World

Film Discussion Guide for the Classroom

***in association with the Origins of Islam and Muslim Civilization
Program***

Prepared by Unity Productions Foundation



UPF

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Overview:

Dear Educator,

Consistent with the Standards of Learning for your state, the **Origins of Islam and Muslim Civilization** is a complimentary educational resource provided by Unity Productions Foundation. The program utilizes two UPF films, *Islamic Art: Mirror of the Invisible World* and *Muhammad: Legacy of a Prophet*, each of which can be accessed by visiting www.originsofislam.upf.tv. Designed for World History and a wide range of Social Studies classes at the high school level, as well as the undergraduate college and university level, this program enables your students to benefit from PBS films that introduce these topic, and lesson plans and discussion guides to further reflect on the information shared in the films. The films and associated lesson plans and discussion guides may help your students understand some of the following issues:

- The origin, beliefs, traditions, and customs of Islam;
- The geography of early Islam and its interaction with other faith communities;
- Cultural and scientific contributions and achievements of Islamic civilization.

The Islamic Art film begins with the origins of the Islamic religion and then looks at cultural contributions in modern day Israel, Syria, Spain, India, Mali, Tunisia, Egypt, and Iran. Using the story of artistic masterworks, it speaks to the broader theme of the geography of Islam.

An important note: **Each screening and discussion requires the completion of an evaluation form for all students participating, which will be emailed to you upon signing up for the program.** Questions can be directed to outreach@upf.tv.

When you agree to show one or both of these films in your classroom, discuss with your students, and submit evaluation forms back to us, we will send you the DVD(s) free of charge. Dates for participating in this program vary, and are indicated on the project website, www.originsofislam.upf.tv.

Thank you for participating!

Unity Productions Foundation

Pre-viewing: Introduction Segment

There are several common threads in human artistic expression—beautiful objects created by human beings. Civilization’s greatest gift is the outpouring of creativity that resulted in the making of beautiful and useful things, and the technologies that make artistic expression possible. The universal human experience of the arts transcends history and culture. Each culture’s arts contribute an essential part of world civilization. Islamic art was made at the crossroads of civilizations. The arts bridge between poles like conflict and competition, conflict and reconciliation, usefulness and beauty. The story of the arts involves shared techniques and common culture. Art creates a window on individual cultures, but embodies universal qualities.

From the seventh century to the present, artistic expression has been part of the experience of Islam. From the diverse civilization and the wealth in human and material resources, an outpouring of arts has characterized Muslim civilization. Muslim cultures have always been open, taking in influences, goods, and ideas, transforming and transmitting them to others in turn. The flow of people who made and enjoyed Islamic arts of all kinds across borders was constant. This inward and outward sharing created great diversity, yet it is possible to see the common elements.

You don’t have to be an expert to appreciate the arts. Just open your sensibilities to the visual, spatial and tactile aspects of the visual arts. Imagine the creators and users of art objects as ways to connect with the worlds of the past.

The film has five thematic segments, or chapters accessible from the menu: Space, Word, Water, Ornament, and Color. Within these segments, several essential ideas are interwoven:

Islamic societies are internally diverse and multi-dimensional.

People of different faiths, languages and ethnicities lived within the region as a whole, but also lived in close-knit cities that drew visitors from far and wide. Diverse and cosmopolitan cities were the forerunners of global cities today.

Islamic art reflects not only the elite who lived in palaces and ruled from the center. Objects and spaces also reflect life viewed from the edges of Muslim society in all of its variety.

The histories of human societies are connected in many ways

Through the arts we can learn how our histories are connected across time and geographic space, as ideas, materials, and styles were exchanged among human societies. This process is still going on today, and not only in one direction.

The arts are spiritual and worldly, and the artistic process is connected to the spiritual as well as the worldly realm

Creation of beauty is a quality of God. The beauty of God's creation inspires people, and religions encourage human beings to act with beauty in the world. There is an expansive aesthetic and a glorious heritage to Islamic art. This is a new perspective on the Islamic experience that is often neglected.

Islamic art is intertwined with the fabric of world civilization

The Islamic world and cultures have always been in interaction with groups outwardly and from within. Interaction among Muslims, and those living within Muslim societies who adhere to other religions, have enriched Islamic arts. Influences from beyond Muslim societies have introduced new and traditional ideas, styles, and techniques. Techniques such as carpet weaving, garden design, miniature painting, and book illumination are only a few of the fine arts traditions upon which Islamic art has drawn for inspiration and techniques.

Video Segment/Chapter: "The Word" [5:27 minutes]

This segment of the documentary represents one of the earliest and most continuous forms of artistic expression in Islamic art. Writing was the central feature of Islamic art, and Arabic inscriptions became the distinctive feature of emerging Islamic art in architecture, texts, and decoration of objects used in everyday life. Writing was both an essential subject of art and it also became an important element of ornament itself. From early buildings such as the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, to the Alhambra palace in Spain, as well as in mosques wherever Muslims live, writing has been used to capture the word of God, grant blessings, teach, and inspire a sense of beauty.

Writing pens and writing materials, as well as the act of writing itself have both practical and very spiritual, even mystical qualities. Great care was taken by traditional calligraphers to prepare the pen, ink, and paper, and to train the hand, the eye and the soul of the calligrapher to combine in creating beautiful writing and decorative illumination. Writing in the Islamic tradition ranges from plain writing to very decorative scripts with intertwined letters and ornamental shapes in materials as varied as stone, ink, paper, paint, leather, wood, metal, ceramics and glass. As an artistic element, the word has a continuous role in Islamic art to the present day. Even Muslim cultures that did not adopt Arabic as their spoken language were profoundly influenced by Arabic language and script, and incorporated it into their artistic expression in religious and secular works.

Discussion Questions:

1. How does Muslim culture express the value of literacy in art?

[Possible answers: decorative writing was among the first art forms to emerge and the most continuous; use of paper, development of specialized writing tools, arts of the book, illumination, complex discipline of calligraphy]

and preparation of paper, ink, pen—toolboxes for writing as artistic objects in themselves]

- 2. In what ways are listening, writing, and reading words both practical and spiritual experiences? What role does beautiful writing play in Islamic art and how does it relate to Islamic beliefs and teachings?**

[Possible answers: the reciter and the calligrapher honor the word of God when reproducing the Qur'an (the holy book of Islam) or the words of the Prophet (called *hadith*)]

- 3. Architects often use writing to increase the impact of building material and space on the viewer. How do inscriptions in the buildings (Dome of the Rock, Alhambra palace, and examples of calligraphy in mosques) affect people emotionally and intellectually as they experience these spaces? Name some buildings or other works of architecture you have experienced that use words as part of their impact.**

[Possible answers: Monuments, public buildings, memorials, tombstones, or even moving digital and lighted displays in public places.]

- 4. What other dimensions of the word are expressed in human culture? What forms do they take in Islamic arts and culture?**

[Possible answers: The spoken word in recited scripture, poetry and song, storytelling and conversation, and prose literature. The power of words of blessing and guidance—the words of the Prophet Muhammad as a source of knowledge about ethics and morals.]

Video Segment/Chapter: “Space” [18:49 minutes]

This segment about architecture and its settings explores the variety of buildings found in Muslim cities, and the characteristics of dwellings from the simple adobe houses to palaces. Like everyday objects, living spaces speak of Islamic values, and the way people use space reflects their culture and ways of life. The mosque—an Islamic place of worship—is a specialized space that developed certain characteristics in the early Islamic centuries. The form began with Prophet Muhammad’s simple, rectangular mosque made from palm trunks and mud-brick, or adobe (a word originating from the Arabic word for mud, *al-tob*). The mihrab, or niche showing the direction of Makkah, is the only standard element in every mosque, but examples from North America to the Far East differ in shape, materials and styles. The mosque shows the openness of Islamic society to regional influences, absorbing styles and building techniques, and incorporating features within its sacred tradition. Mosques helped define the village or city spaces and were surrounded by schools, markets, hospitals, workshops, and public spaces. Whether simple or decorated on every surface, mosques express people’s experience of prayer.

Palaces were exclusive spaces that expressed power and pleasure for elites, but they were also showcases for artisans' and architects' best work and the heights of technology. Royal gardens were often laboratories for the spread of useful and beautiful plants across the world. Water gardens showed off complex technologies for fountains, waterwheels, and even mechanical, animated machines like clockwork birds and animals.

Discussion Questions:

- 1. How did architecture represent the mingling of cultures and crafts—what historic Islamic buildings represent this mixing of cultures, and what elements did they combine?**

[Possible answers: the many different forms that mosques, homes, and palaces adopted from local cultures; building techniques adapted to different environmental conditions and cultural preferences; use of available materials such as stone, brick, wood, adobe, ceramics]

- 2. How do houses of worship represent the experience of prayer in their traditions? How do mosques relate to the way Muslims experience prayer in the community?**

[Possible answers: the direction in which worshippers face; the altar and the mihrab as contrasting focal points in church and mosque; the use of open and enclosed space, the play of light and shadow]

- 3. How does a building embody a spiritual message? What buildings can you remember visiting that inspired you?**

[Possible answers: a building can create a mood of imposing grandeur or simplicity, or a sense of infinity or secure enclosure, for example. Participants share their own varied experiences of places they have visited and perhaps experienced spiritually.]

- 4. How do palaces like the Alhambra or Topkapi reflect the culture of wealth and power? What elements of palaces relate to the lives of ordinary people?**

[Possible answers: palaces often have a hierarchical arrangement from the outer spaces to which the public is admitted, toward inner spaces where access is limited to an inner circle of privilege. Public areas advertise the care of the ruler for common people by providing access in an atmosphere that is also aesthetically beautiful. Use of the highest handicraft skills for display by the ruler, "sparing no expense" display the wealth of the territory over which the ruler presides. Many aspects of palace life are eventually scaled down for imitation by middle classes (merchants, officials, etc.) but remain far beyond the range of ordinary people.

Video Segment/Chapter: “Ornament” [35:29 minutes]

Ornament means decoration. Instead of making basic, useful objects and buildings that are plain, artists incorporate decorative elements into the design—like the spout of a pitcher in the shape of a bird’s beak—or they decorate a plain surface with shapes or colors to make it more pleasing. Complex decoration is one of the most recognizable features of Islamic art. Endless designs using geometric patterns that fit together to cover the surface: interlaced vines and flowers combine in Islamic art to create endless designs. These designs became more than ornament of objects; they became the subject of art in many forms, such as carpets, tiles, books, metalwork and textiles. In architecture, decorated surfaces created a miniature cosmos, an infinite look into the promise of heaven. Geometric designs depended on sophisticated mathematical knowledge that artists put on display with dynamic effects. Mathematics was central to Islamic religious and social practices—to know direction, time, and location—and was expressed artistically. Patterns of light and shadow could also decorate a plain surface, creating textured surfaces with brickwork or carved wood, or contrasting shapes of arches and pillars, or reflections in a pool of water.

Designs from the world of vegetation were used naturalistically to imitate leaves and flowers in a garden. They were also used in carefully ordered, artificially organized geometric patterns. Figurative art—drawing or sculpting of humans and animals—exists in art produced by Muslims, but not in sacred objects such as Qur’an pages or mosques. Objects for everyday use sometimes depicted human and animal shapes, like a pitcher in the form of a bird or people on horseback riding around the rim of a bowl. Ivory boxes might depict musicians or hunting scenes, evidence of influences from objects made for royalty in surrounding cultures, and Muslim rulers collected these treasures and presented them to others as signs of wealth, power, and good taste. Textiles, from carpets and silk brocades to simple cotton and linen fabrics, were portable objects of comfort and luxury that spread far and wide through trade. Textiles and ceramics were objects that showed the most evidence of exchange among cultures in style, color, and technique. Carpets from Persia, and other parts of Central Asia, became a unique art that is still valued highly today and widely imitated in machine-made rugs.

Ornament was a way to investigate the world that God created, and to imagine the ideal world and the promised world to come after death.

Discussion Questions:

- 1. Think of a favorite, beautiful object that you own—what do you use it for? Think of an object you saw in the film that you would like to use—think about what attracted you to it. What would you do with it if it were yours?**

[Possible answers: encourage participants to think of the most beautiful thing they or their families own that is associated with a memory. What role does it play in the family or social situation? Encourage participants to think

of an object in the film that they found beautiful, or have seen in a museum exhibit.]

- 2. Choose an object and “interview it” as if it could speak about who made it, how it was made, and why people at the time admired it.**

[This activity can enhance viewing of the film by allowing engagement with the kinds of objects that were featured in the film. Go to a museum exhibit on Islamic art such as <http://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-museum/museum-departments/curatorial-departments/islamic-art> or <http://www.dia.org/art/search-collection.aspx?department=Islamic+Art> or <http://www.asia.si.edu/collections/islamic.asp>. Participants work in pairs or individually to engage with a work of art and tell its story through an imaginary interview.]

- 3. Name three elements of decoration in Islamic art that fascinated you. How does it affect your eye—what does it make you imagine? Does it affect your feelings, your mood?**

[Answers vary but encourage participants in the discussion to “get inside” the visual experience of the examples shown in the film and in exhibits such as those linked above.]

- 4. Buildings are very solid and cloth is flat and plain. How does Islamic art transform these surfaces with complex geometric and floral designs?**

[Possible answers: use of light and shadow to create patterns that make flat surfaces seem three-dimensional; use of color and designs to lead the eye in different directions, to create visual excitement, or to have a calming effect. Use the cues in the film to suggest the variety of ways Islamic art affects the viewer.]

- 5. The Taj Mahal is a building that uses shape, material, and decoration to honor a beloved woman forever. The Djenne mosque is a very plain building intended to create a space for communal prayer, teaching, and reflection. Compare the way light and form work to make each building an object of beauty.**

[Answers vary.]

Video Segment/Chapter: “Color” [55:25 minutes]

This segment of the film describes the role that color played in the creation and impact of Islamic art. Color was valued in earlier times because of its rarity—color was rare in dry landscapes, and color in nature was not permanent. People learned to capture color by discovering dyes and pigments that they could use to color clothing, furniture, and surfaces of homes, like rugs and tiled walls. They used difficult techniques and rare, precious natural materials to create color in man-made things. Color made life more pleasant. Substances from the mineral and vegetable world that were used as artistic colorings were expensive trade goods from faraway lands. These recipes for coloring cloth, ceramics, glass, and metals were valuable

techniques shared among different cultures. For example, cobalt glaze discovered in Iran became known in China; red dye made from tiny insects was a precious trade good; indigo for making blue cloth is still appreciated today as blue jeans. Colors combined into shapes, lines, and patterns can transform hard, solid surfaces to give the feeling of airy spaces, moving and expanding as if they were no longer solid. Geometric designs with curving lines created optical illusions and fantastic visual fields. Many decorated mosques transformed their impact on viewers because of the use of patterns and colors. Arts of the book were another use of color in Islamic art—illuminated calligraphy and miniature paintings that tell stories are two art forms that still exist today. Figurative art—the drawing of human and animal images—was mainly confined to small objects or images in books, but not in religious objects or architecture. Most figurative art in Muslim societies was created on flat surfaces with the use of color, rather than being carved or shaped in the round as in western art, for example.

Discussion Questions:

- 1. Colors are related to mood—what colors did you find in the objects shown that call up certain feelings?**

[Possible answers: Encourage participants to think about and share the emotional impact of colors, the cultural meanings of certain colors, the way they affect children and adults, for example: deep red in a carpet, bright blue on wall tiles, different metallic tones like silver, copper and gold. How do different cultures express and use color, or how is color used in different types of celebration, such as somber or happy events?]

- 2. We are surrounded by color in our media today—advertising, clothing, furnishings, and computer graphics. How does color send messages today?**

[Possible answers: Gather as many spontaneous responses from participants as possible based on experience with various media: from television advertising, to street displays and graffiti, to clothing people wear to attract attention or play it down, to sell things or create moods in restaurants, malls, and other public spaces. How is color used in home settings, in contrast, to personalize space? Finally, relate participants' experience with what they learned about color in Islamic art.]

- 3. Imagine a time when colors had to be won from the environment. What sources of color could be found in nature and processed to make into paints, glazes for plain clay, or wood? How did people use color for everyday objects? How was color used in public spaces like a mosque or a monument? What was the effect of color?**

[Possible answers: Build upon the previous question's responses, but think back to a time before chemical dyes, artificial lighting, and LCDs that glow. Encourage participants to think of examples of natural dyes and contrast their impact as discussed in the film. Among the major examples of vibrant color mentioned in the film were gardens and ceramic tiles, as well as woven

carpets and sparkling metal objects. Have participants imagine themselves living in that world, and what impact such objects would have on the eye of the beholder.]

4. What are some of the most important dyes in history—do some research—and what were their sources

[Possible answers: indigo from a plant, henna from a plant, red from insect bodies, purple from a tiny snail, yellow from saffron flower centers, yellow and red from clay, white from lead and tin, cobalt, copper, and iron to make blue, red, and green when heated as glaze.

Participants may research the trade in colors long ago: How are dyes made today [chemicals] and how has our relationship to color changed from when color was a great luxury?]

5. One of the art historians said of the overall patterns in colored tiles that the use of color “dematerializes” the building. In other words, color makes hard surfaces and massive walls seem as if they were made only of color—they no longer seem solid. How does color play tricks on the eye? Which colors stand out or come forward, and which ones seem to fade into the background?

[Discuss this experience that results from artful use of color, and look for examples in Islamic arts and in the art of other cultures. Look for examples online such as this one: <http://www.patterninislamicart.com/>]

Video Segment/Chapter: “Water” [1:09:00 minutes]

Much of the historic lands of Islam are in climates where rainfall is scarce or seasonal. On the other hand, great rivers like the Nile, the Niger, the Tigris-Euphrates and the Indus River flowed through lands where Muslims flourished for centuries. Water was important in Islamic religion, in Islamic law governing its sharing and use by communities, and for the growth and survival of cities. Techniques evolved over centuries for managing the flow and storage of water for farming, drinking, and manufacturing. These difficult techniques have been shared among many cultures, and Muslim societies played a role in transferring many of these engineering techniques. Bringing water to people means prosperity, productivity, and pleasure. The verses of the Qur’an associate water with the origins of life, with its continuity and eternity, and with its ability to produce food, gardens and natural landscapes. Islamic art celebrates water by making beautiful containers for carrying it, by making public works of art like fountains and reflecting pools, and by creating and beautifying public waterworks that bring it to communities, like waterwheels, aqueducts, and reservoirs. Purification with clear water is a religious duty in Islam before prayer, and purification of the body with water is a physical and a spiritual act. Places for washing in the mosque, for drinking fountains in public squares and in public baths, were places made beautiful in Islamic lands. From palaces of stone to adobe buildings, from the countryside to the cities, water was part of all Muslim communities where people lived and worked.

Discussion Questions

- 1. The word for Paradise is from the Persian language word for a walled garden— what did you learn about the use of water and growing things in Islamic art? How is the image of paradise reflected in Islamic art?**

[Possible answers: many of the places where Muslim culture developed were arid lands, so the value of greenery, brilliantly colored flowers, and flowing water was extraordinary. Many verses in the Qur'an refer to the beauty of Paradise, which sparked the imagination of artists to create a mirror of the imagination in visual and literary arts.]

- 2. Water is vital for human communities. What technologies bring water to people as shown in the film? How are they transformed in beautiful ways for the community to enjoy? How similar are systems of bringing water to people today? How different? Are we missing some of the beauty of this basic need today or is it still present in our civilization?**

[Possible answers: Fountains transformed and animated a simple stream of water, even in the time before electric pumps, so they were wonders of engineering, bringing water from afar or underground. Participants can be encouraged to think about the special qualities of water to reflect: to flow in small and wide streams, to reflect light, magnify objects under it, and cause designs under its transparent surface to move and undulate. Transferring these ideas to our own time, participants can think about how water is used in architecture, entertainment, and celebration today in both public and private spaces.

- 3. How does water play a role in architecture—in constructing buildings, in making them function for people's use, in making buildings beautiful, and in creating restful places. Compare examples from the film with buildings in your city or places you have visited.**

[Possible answers: Use Internet searches of Islamic buildings, and buildings in the local area or country, to discuss the effects of water in architecture and to explore the influence of different cultures' architectural styles on modern architecture and public spaces with water features.

CONCLUDING QUESTIONS

1. **What reaction did you have after watching this film? How did this film change your view of Islam?**
2. **What did you like best about what you saw and heard—name something that captured your imagination or curiosity**
3. **Did you recognize any shared symbols between Islamic arts and those of other cultures?**
4. **In what ways does the impact of what you saw seem similar to other artistic traditions? In what ways do Islamic arts you saw in the film seem unlike other artistic traditions that you know?**

[Answers vary and reflect the way in which viewer's eyes and minds have been opened by the discussions in response to aspects of the film above. These questions involve very personal responses, especially ways that viewers connect their own experiences with the discussion of Islamic art and culture.]

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