



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
COLLEGE OF SOCIAL & BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES

Center for Middle Eastern Studies

Art History 101 Calligraphy lesson plan

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Learning objectives

1. Recall that calligraphy is one of the three design elements in Islamic art
2. Distinguish between Kufic and cursive styles of calligraphy
3. Recall the principles of calligraphic aesthetics
 - a. Calligraphy is the most important of the three design elements in Islamic art
 - b. Calligraphy is beautiful writing
 - c. In calligraphy, the word is also an image
 - d. Koranic calligraphy's beauty is meant to express the divinity of God's word
 - e. Koranic calligraphy embodies the beauty that is God.
 - f. The calculated proportions of calligraphic scripts reflects the harmony and order of God and God's creation.
4. Demonstrate knowledge of Arabic orthography
 - a. Reading from right to left
 - b. Letter position
 - c. Letter connection

Introduction

Of all the artistic practices of Islam, calligraphy is the most important. Not only has calligraphy been highly aestheticized and systematized by Islamic artists over the centuries, but when used to transcribe the teachings of God in the [Koran](#), calligraphy is



charged with religious and spiritual power. If purity of writing is purity of the soul, according to the Arabic proverb, then calligraphy is the means to achieve that state of piety.

In this module you will learn the aesthetic and cultural principles of Islamic calligraphy and the basics of Arabic writing so that you can better understand what you are seeing when you look at Islamic calligraphy. You won't be learning Arabic, but just the basic logic of how the written language works. In class you will get some experience writing in Arabic and creating your own calligraphy with traditional reed pens.

Image: Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bifolium from a Qur'an, late 9th–10th century

Reading

Go to the [Metropolitan Museum of Art's website](#) and download the pdf, *Islamic Calligraphy* by Annemarie Schimmel. (Because the text is copyrighted, I can't publish it in Canvas, but you can go to the website yourself and download a copy for your personal use.) Read pages 1 through 20. The text is wonderfully illustrated so make sure you spend some time looking at the different examples of calligraphy from different parts of Islam.

As you read through the article look for answers to the following questions:

- Why is calligraphy so important in Islam?
- What are some of the main kinds of calligraphy and what are the distinctions?
- How was calligraphy standardized in the tenth century?
- In addition to paper and [vellum](#), what other mediums do artists use for their calligraphy?

Lecture: Calligraphy and aesthetic principles

What is calligraphy?

I don't think I have studied another culture where the visual word is as dominant as it is in Islam. Indeed, it is the dominant art form in Islam. To understand how the word functions in Islamic art, it's important to distinguish between the semantic and formal dimensions of writing. In the semantic case, we use words to communicate and share ideas. Words stand in for concepts that are related when we speak, read, or write.

In the formal case, the written word also has a form, it has a shape and orientation on the page or support and other visual qualities that communicate ideas that are separate from the literal meaning of the word. Think of the word as a picture, an image unto itself. For example, in comics, words are drawn in such a way as to evoke feelings of power or energy or movement or

some other sense. The stylized words have their own graphic qualities just like drawings of people and objects.

In Islam, the word performs semantically, but the word's imagistic qualities have been highly developed and refined. We call writing that is meant to be appreciated for how it looks, and not just for what it says, calligraphy. You can also think of calligraphy as simply, beautiful writing.

A caveat. The geographic area covered by Islam is immense and varied, so to speak about Islamic calligraphy, as if it was some unified practice with singular characteristics, is incorrect. There are many kinds of calligraphy written by Muslims with many different approaches. I am mostly familiar with calligraphy of Northern Africa through the middle East, so that is what you will be seeing and hearing about.

Aesthetics of calligraphy in Islam

So how do we understand the importance of calligraphy in Islam and what makes calligraphic writing beautiful?

The beautification of the written word is closely tied to the creation of Korans. The Koran is a book that contains what God said to the Prophet Muhammed as it was communicated to the Prophet by the angel Gabriel. And here is where calligraphy comes in for while God spoke to Muhammed, humans had to record what God said in writing. How do you even begin to do justice to the word of God when you are a mere mortal and all you have is pen and paper? By making what you write as beautiful as possible. Calligraphy in the Koran is meant to approximate the glory of God's utterances and to materially reflect the divinity of the speaker.

Additionally, the use of the figure in Islamic culture is problematic because to represent a person or animal is considered to be a form of creation, something that only God can do. Artists therefore shied away from drawing figures. Calligraphy filled the visual hole created by this aversion to figurative representation. Instead of becoming experts in rendering people, Islamic artists became experts in rendering the word of God, or poetry, or important teachings.

The notion of observable beauty itself in Islam is closely related to God as something that is beautiful. To make something pleasing to look at or to create something according to ideal principles is to come closer to the beauty that is God. Because we know the world that was created by God through our senses, when artists present something to our senses such as beautiful writing, or beautiful music, or beautiful poetry we are learning about God. Calligraphers aren't just trying to delight our senses, but are also trying to make us aware of a God who is present in the beauty of the writing.

Styles and standardization

Beautiful writing in Islam has been around almost since the beginning of the religion and over time many styles of calligraphy have been developed. I would like to introduce two main kinds of

calligraphy that you should be able to distinguish from each other: Kufic and cursive. While you will most likely never have to identify these calligraphic styles in your life, being able to tell the difference between the two is good practice at looking closely and analyzing what you see.

In the early centuries of Islam, several calligraphic styles were used to copy the Koran, but Kufic came to dominate and is still used today in more artistic uses. Kufic is rectilinear, its letters composed of straight horizontal and vertical lines that come together at right angles. The letters closely conform to the line on which they are written so that most of the letter remains on or above the line, with few if any parts of the letter descending below. While Kufic script was the script used the most, almost exclusively, for the Koran, artists still experimented with the style. The long vertical components of the letters were often braided together or elaborated into foliated designs.

While Kufic was used to codify the word of God, other scripts that were more easily and efficiently written were used for business or official purposes. These forms were known as cursive and were characterized by rounded and curved letter forms that flowed across the page and were more efficiently produced by a human hand. In the tenth century, Ibn Muqla, a court official, systematized this cursive style into something renowned for its elegance. He is believed to have set standards for the proportions of individual letters and the proportions between letters. As with much of Islamic art, the proportions of these new scripts function aesthetically as well as spiritually to reflect the order and harmony of God and God's creation. While we do not have any examples of Ibn Muqla's calligraphy, we know that it was so beautiful that it began to supplant Kufic as the principle style for transcribing the scripture. Cursive calligraphy was so popular that other artists created unique styles based on Ibn Muqla's work. There are six major cursive scripts created in the classical tradition.

Calligraphic mediums

Tile
Ceramics
Manuscripts
Architecture

Lecture: Arabic orthography

To better understand what you see in Arabic calligraphy, it's important to understand its orthography, or the rules that govern how it is written.

Unlike English and other European languages, which are written and read from left to right, Arabic is written and read from right to left. Like English, Arabic is written and read from the top to the bottom of the page. While this might seem difficult at first, you will be surprised how quickly your eye and brain learn this new orientation.

The next thing to understand is that while Arabic has a standard alphabet, the letters in the alphabet look different depending on where they occur in a word. There are three positions for a letter: an initial position or the beginning of a word, a medial position in the middle of a word, and a final position at the end of the word.

Arabic does not have a printed form. All writing in Arabic is done in what we would call cursive where all the letters, with a few exceptions, are connected. In this way, writing and reading Arabic flows across the page, making it an elegant script for calligraphy.

Learning quiz

This quiz covers terms and concepts presented in the preceding lectures. The quiz is a formative assessment meant to direct students to important terms and ideas and let the instructor know how much of the material is being understood and retained. Online quizzes will be done with Quizlet. In person classes will utilize Kahoot and will use Quizlet as supplementary practice.

Activity

Students will download the file or be given the worksheet, Moroccan Arabic Alphabet and Letter Connection. Students will familiarize themselves with the different letters and their positions and then practice transcribing letters into their positional forms and connecting them using the exercise at the end of the worksheet.

An additional worksheet will give the students practice at deconstructing Arabic words into unconnected and independent letter forms.

Demonstration and activity

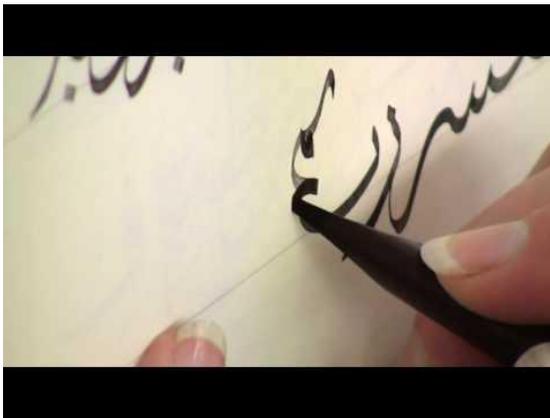
Videos will show artists writing in calligraphy and how calligraphy pens are made. In-class demonstrations will demonstrate how calligraphy pens are used. Students will experiment with calligraphy pens learning how to hold them, orient the nib to paper, and practice making marks. Students will then copy several words with the calligraphy pens.

Qalam Crafting - The Art of Creating a Calligraphy Pen. [8-min]

This mesmerizing video shows the intricacy, skill, and patience required to make a calligraphy pen. You might think the video is long but that length communicates the forbearance of calligraphic artists. Double click on the image below and then play the video.



This video shows an artist writing in calligraphy.



Additional resources

[Calligraphy Qalam](#)-a website on Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman calligraphy. A great resource on technical and visual aspects of calligraphy with galleries and videos.