

Muslim Calligraphy and Arabesque

Key background information

Though representation of people and living creatures is not unknown in the art of Muslims (in Persian paintings, for example), Islamic art has generally been 'nonrepresentational'. The representation of people and living creatures has been avoided, and even the use of floral designs, on prayer-mats and tiles for example, has been stylised rather than realistic. This instinctive move against representational art is rooted in the Muslim belief that *shirk*, imitating Allah or putting something in Allah's place, should be avoided at all costs. It is for the same reason that the Prophet Muhammad is not represented. In the film about the Prophet's life, *The Message*, the Prophet's voice is heard but he is never seen.

The Muslim artistic urge has expressed itself primarily through calligraphy and Arabesque. Calligraphy uses the Arabic words of the Qur'an, and many different styles have developed (such as the *Kufic*), some square and angular, others more curved and full of flourishes. Arabesque is recognisable by its use of symmetrical patterns and motifs which, when covering a large area, such as the inside outside of a mosque dome, can be breathtaking. It sometimes said that the sense of profound order created Arabesque can remind a Muslim of the profound universal order which Allah has created. A building such as the 'Dome of the Rock' in Jerusalem shows both Arabesque calligraphy at their finest.

This activity not only provides an opportunity for children learn about Islamic art but also to apply what they learned in a design task.

What to do

Give each child a copy of photocopiable sheet. Ask them to look at the patterns on the sheet closely and then say:

- what they think the patterns are;
- whether they can see different kinds of pattern;
- whether they have seen patterns like this before;
- whether there is anything else they notice about the patterns.

Next, explain what the patterns are by covering the following points:

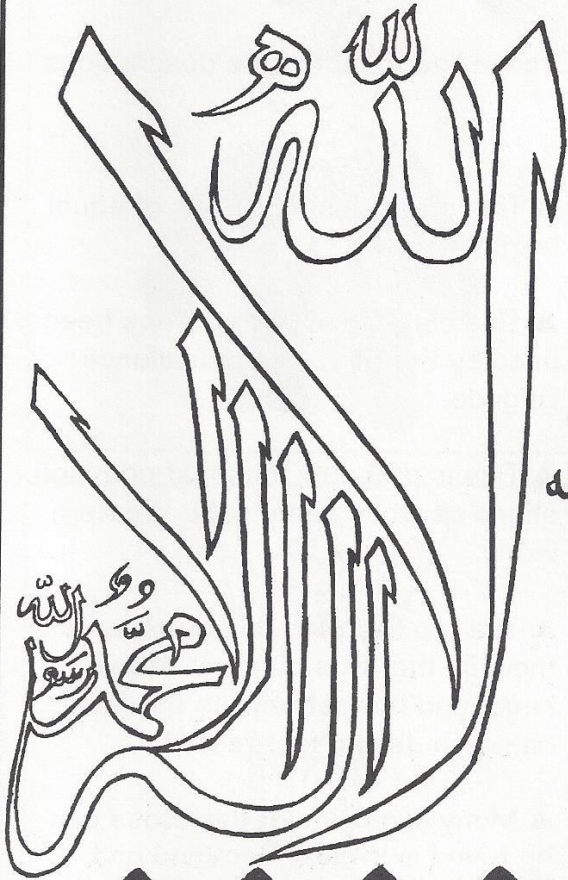
- These are the kinds of pattern which Muslims have used for well over 1000 years.
- Patterns like these would be found outside and inside Muslim buildings like mosques.
- Some of the patterns use Arabic writing taken from the Qur'an and decorate it beautifully.
- When writing is made aesthetically pleasing like this it is called 'calligraphy'.

- Muslims have wanted to make the words of the Qur'an beautiful because they believe that these words were given by Allah (God) and are therefore very special.
- The other patterns on the sheet use repeated shapes and symmetry.
- When Muslims do this it is called 'Arabesque'.
- Muslims do not usually draw or paint pictures of people and other living creatures because they believe that this would be like copying Allah who made living things.
- Instead, Muslim artists have used Arabesque to show that the world is a beautiful place which Allah has made.

Finally, explain that sometimes Muslim artists have deliberately incorporated a mistake into their work as a reminder that only Allah is perfect.

Having highlighted that the way in which buildings are decorated will sometimes reflect what people believe and think is important, set the following task for the children. It can be completed either individually or in pairs.

A school has decided that its hall should be decorated, paying particular attention to the front wall that faces the children and teachers during assemblies. The school would like the decoration of this wall to include patterns and calligraphy which remind people of what is important about school. Tell the children that the words and patterns must be connected with school so that, for example, words connected with learning could be used in the calligraphy, a pattern could use books and pencils for shapes. While the children are carrying out this task, discuss with them why they have chosen particular words or patterns.



الله اعلم الحق القبول

لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ مُحَمَّدٌ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ

