

# Chapter 13

## IN PRAISE OF ALLAH

### The Art of the Islamic World

#### Summary:

- Seventh century- the forces of Islam burst across the Mediterranean world completely remaking the map.
- In the eighth century, the Islamic Empire controlled North Africa and southern Spain.
- In 732 they were stopped by Charles Martel in the Loire valley and were turned in defeat to return to Spain. Ferdinand and Isabella finally drove the Muslim forces from Spain in 1492.
- In the East, Muslim armies marched as far as the Indus River and held significant territory by 751.
- It wasn't until 1453, when Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks, that *Muslim pressure on the Byzantine Empire ended victoriously*. This swift and complete conquest of these territories was not due to just superior military strategies.
- The Islamic religion had a great appeal to the millions of converts. The contributions of Islam to the body of world knowledge are unparalleled.
- Arab scholars translated classical philosophers and these translations were sent to the West. *Arab scholarship also laid the foundations for arithmetic and astronomy*; they made significant contributions to the study of medicine. Their art also created an enduring body of elegant design and decorative elements.

#### I. Lecture Model

*The nature of Islam and the prohibition of figuration* make the analysis methodology more formal. Iconography as such is not applicable. The social approach works very well as this was a religion that encompassed vast geography and indigenous aesthetic definitions were already being used. *Patronage does play a role as does the political activities of the followers of Muhammad*. It would be more useful to employ these methodologies in describing this art form.

- 1) When one compares the region around the Mediterranean during the period of Roman hegemony one can see the profound changes that had taken place as a result of the astounding conquests of Islam.
- The word Islam means "submission to God" and this new faith, which originated in the Arabian City of Mecca, was soon to transform the Mediterranean world. Yet the text for this faith, *the Quran (Koran)*, is closely related to the Bible.
- In 611 Mohammed received a vision from the archangel Gabriel, who revealed to him his task as prophet and "messenger of Allah." He preached in Mecca where he was not appreciated, and then in the city of Medina, where he

had better success. *There is a relationship between Islam, Christianity and Judaism.*

- All three have Old Testament roots, Hagar and Ishmael, first son of Abraham, were rescued from the desert by an angel. The site of the rescue was Mecca, the birthplace of Islam. Almost immediately after Muhammad's death political and religious difficulties arose among his followers, but the civil wars did not stop the march of Islam, which was spread by the sword.

- Deputies sent out from Mecca originally governed the vast territory conquered by the Muslims. But gradually the territories broke away under the control of powerful dynasties:

- The Umayyads in Syria and Spain in the seventh and ninth centuries

- The Abbasids in Iraq from the eighth through the tenth centuries

- The Fatimids in Egypt and Tunisia from the tenth through the twelfth centuries.

One of the great triumphs of Islam is its entry into Jerusalem, the home of the three great religions of the Middle East: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.



13-01 Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, 687-692.

- The Dome of the Rock (13-1), a structure created *to mark Muhammad's ascent into Heaven*, was erected on the supposed site of:

- Adam's burial

- The area of Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac

- Later the Temple of Solomon destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE.

- This structure, Dome of the Rock was erected under the Umayyads in 687 CE. It is thought *the rotunda of the Holy Sepulchre* influenced the design also in Jerusalem.

- The Dome of the Rock was conceived not as a place of worship, but rather as *a sanctuary marking a particularly holy site*. The very name of this building describes its function, *covering the supposed rock from which Muhammad ascended into Heaven*.

- It has been suggested that Umayyad Caliph Abd al-Malik who commissioned this structure wanted it to outshine the Christian monuments already constructed in Jerusalem or even to create a more spectacular site than the Ka ba in Mecca.

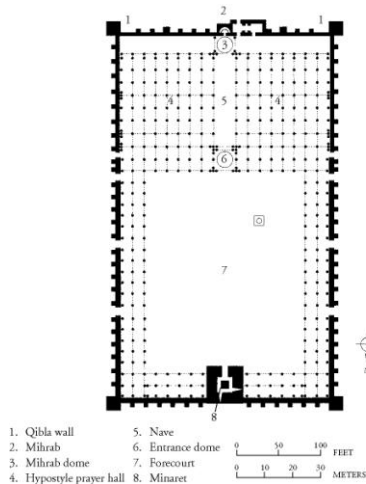
- It could be argued that not only was a deeply religious commitment made Caliph Abd al-Malik but also a political statement as well.
- The Dome of the Rock (13-1) creates a visual presence in Jerusalem.
- The gilded dome marks the horizon of the cityscape, *the exterior decorations, though greatly restored, sixteenth century tiles replace the original mosaics*; nevertheless, the original appearance must have been as spectacular as the Dome is seen today.



13-02 Interior of the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, 687-692.

The interior (13-2) program retains much of the original seventh century mosaics.

- The interior shows the rich decorative program, carefully designed to create an elegant interior space, which created a vision of the message of Muhammad.
- In addition to the floral motifs, there are inscriptions that are specifically addressed to the Christians, for example one excerpt reads, “*The Messiah Jesus Son of Mary is only an apostle of God*”. The intent of the inscriptions was meant to teach the Islamic tenet, that there is only one God and he is Allah and his prophet is Muhammad.
- Again the intent of *the structure serves* a two-fold purpose, *a monument to a religion and a political statement regarding the rulership of the territory*.
- This was to become the Crusader cry in the Medieval period, free the Holy Land from the Infidel.



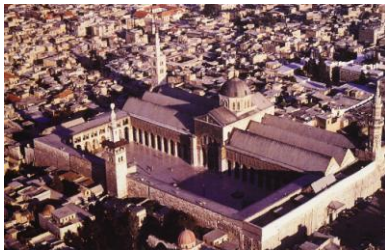
13-08- Plan of the Great Mosque, Kairouan, Tunisia,

ca. 836-875.

■ The religious demands of Islam influenced the development of mosque architectural form. *The essence of Islamic religious practice is prayer, a simple, private act that makes no demands for an elaborate liturgy.* The major requirement was an indication of the direction of Mecca, for Muslims are obliged to face Mecca when they pray.

■ A wall, known as the *qiblah* wall, indicated that direction. In the center of the *qiblah* wall was a niche, known as the *mihrab* both are seen in the plan of the Great Mosque, Kairouan, Tunisia (13-8).

■ During the Umayyad dynasty, the capital had been moved from Mecca to Damascus.



■ The Great Mosque of Damascus 706-715 CE (13-3) was commissioned by the son of Abd al-Malik, *Caliph al-Walid*.

■ Just as the Dome of the Rock was meant to dazzle the Christians in Jerusalem and perhaps gain more converts, so was the Great Mosque in Damascus.

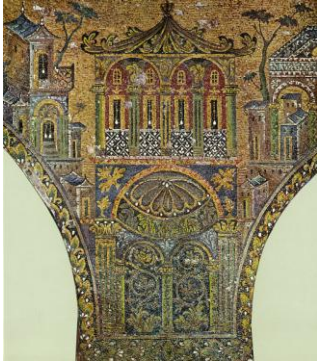
■ This was to be the glowing architectural ornament for the entire Islamic world to see and appreciate. *The Caliph* had razed a number of Christian and Roman structures to make way for his mosque. The elaborate decorative program developed by predominantly non-Arab craftsmen completed the Great Mosque.

■ When the Arabs had captured Damascus in 635 CE, the mosque was relatively simple. In fact, the Arabs used the precinct of a Roman temple to serve as their open-air mosque. *Caliph al-Walid* was interested in solidifying

the Umayyad presence in Damascus and the importance of the Muslim tradition.

■ Once again a two-fold purpose was intended for this structure: *religious and political*.

■ The decorative program used mosaics for the interior and parts of the exterior. The mosaic creates a rich and opulent surface. This was in keeping with the design program.



13-04 Detail of a mosaic in the courtyard arcade of the Great Mosque, Damascus, Syria, 706-715.

■ The detail from the Mosque (13-4) shows just such a surface, a pavilion and flowering rooftop. Perhaps this meant to be a glimpse of Paradise, or an indication of the peace and contentment one can find not only as a follower of the religion; but also, under the guidance and rulership of the Umayyads.

■ Another mosaic from the courtyard spandrel shows a tree in bloom and fruit, possibly an almond tree. *The symbolism for the almond is one of divine approval* and it could also be detailing the wealth of the city and the area under the Umayyads.

■ **Muhammed's concern about idolatry**, however, dictated that no human forms could be represented in the sacred precincts, and this rule was followed throughout the Muslim world. The decorative program developed for the Great Mosque also adhered to this stricture.

■ The development of the mosque became more complex and ornate as the attitude of prayer went from a private, personal devotion to a communal devotion celebrating the Islamic Sabbath, which occurs on Friday.

■ The followers of Muhammad have never abandoned the personal devotional prayer; however, as the conquests grew and the territory expanded, it could be suggested that the subsequent rulers and dynasties wanted to establish a very rich heritage for the following generations.

■ The richest decoration was devoted to the *mihrab*, for the *mihrab* was the niche in the *qibla wall* which is the compass pointing the worshipper to Mecca.



13-13 Dome in front of the mihrab of the Great Mosque, Córdoba, Spain, 961-965.

■ In the Great Mosque of Córdoba, the dome (13-13) over the *mihrab* shows the rich complexity of the decorative programs, which had been developed now.

■ The general decoration of early mosques had been quite simple, for Muhammed urged simplicity, abhorring all vanity that might lead to idolatry.

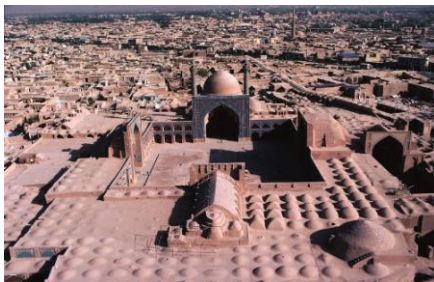
■ However, *the simplicity urged by the prophet was ignored by many of his followers*, particularly the powerful successors to the Umayyads in Spain who *enlarged the mosque at Córdoba*, which was begun under the Umayyads, using a *rich profusion of architectural forms and decorative motifs*.

■ Perhaps this was meant to not only honor Allah; but also, to create the impression of an opulent court and dynasty which could effectively commission such a rich decorative program.

■ The dome is set over the mihrab on squinches the alternative structural device which Muslim architects favored. *Squinches were structural units that were placed diagonally across the four corners of a square, turning it into an octagon, and as such, became a more suitable base for a dome*. The interior of this portion of the mosque is rich in decorative arabesques; *the arabesques based on the organic rhythms of the plant world combined with elegant calligraphy of the words of the holy Quran (Koran) were used profusely in mosques throughout the Muslim world, and seen here*.

■ These very rich and fluid decorative programs developed for the mosque were *thought to assist the faithful in focusing their thoughts on the marvels and glories of Allah*.

■ In Iran, at *Isfahan*, the exterior tiles, which were part of the decorative programs developed for the Shah (Royal) Mosque, reached its highest point for the art of ceramic tile work.



13-23 Aerial view of the Great Mosque (looking southwest), Isfahan, Iran, eleventh to seventeenth centuries.

- The dome of the Shah Mosque (13-23) creates the vision and the illusion of infinite motion. It was to reflect the divine wisdom of Allah and show the infinity of movement that is the mystery of divine love.
- The exterior was a tribute not only to the divine goodness of Allah; but also, a signature statement on the richness and artistic sense of Shah Abbas I (1589-1627) and the Safavid Dynasty of Persian (Iran).
- The rhythm of the ceramic tile design on the dome is a reflection of the artistic genius of the Safavid tilists as well as a reflection on Shah Abbas I who commissioned the structure.
- The inscriptions on the drum of the dome counterbalance the elegant and circular spirals. The windows piercing the drum also effectuate that rhythm of movement, which is an intrinsic component of the overall design. The windows pierce the interior with light and create a play of light and shadow on the exterior.
- The Byzantine emperors had to struggle constantly against the incursions of the forces of Islam and finally Constantinople itself fell before the onslaughts of the Ottoman Turks in 1453, thus bringing the history of the Byzantine Empire to a close.
- The Ottomans, the conquerors of Constantinople, were very aware of the rich building history the Byzantine rulers had developed for Constantinople and the surrounding territory.
- In the Ottoman capital city of Edirne, Selim II commissioned Sinan to construct a mosque, which would reflect the current philosophical architectural expression.



- Sinan created the Mosque of Selim II 1568-75 (13-20), even though it bears a certain resemblance to the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (12-3),
- Sinan was able to create a visual mountain of centralized space, dynamically defined by the four minarets and dedicated to Islam.
- The dome, which rests on the great buttresses, creates a presence in the city.



13-22 SINAN, interior of the Mosque of Selim II, Edirne, Turkey, 1568-1575.

■ The interior (13-22) space is unified by the great dome, which in turn is surrounded by windows creating a great glowing halo. The interior decorative program once again reflects the rhythm and flow of the arabesque to its best advantage, creating a beautiful interior that does not distract from the function of the structure. The interior space is one of calmness and serene silence.

■ Islamic architects explored many options to combine a variety of strong structural elements with rich surface decoration.



■ The facade of the eighth century fortified Muslim palace Mshatta, Jordan (13-6) was decorated with a delicately carved frieze that seemed to turn stone into lace.

■ So called *muqarnas* or “stalactite” decoration is the best example of ornamentation that seems to deny the underlying structural solidity of the forms it covers.



Facade

13-18 Madrasa-mosque-mausoleum complex of Sultan Hasan (view from the south with the mausoleum in the foreground), Cairo, Egypt, begun 1356

■ In contrast to the elegant surface design of Mshatta is the vast plain mass that is the Madrasah-Mosque complex commissioned by Sultan Hasan in the fourteenth century in Cairo (13- 18), a vast complex that houses his mausoleum, mosque and university.

■ The building is arranged around a huge square central court containing an octagonal fountain.

■ In its cruciform arms were four universities that were controlled by the four principal sects of Islam, and at one end is the tomb of the Sultan, which is covered by a rich stalactite dome.

■ The multiple functions are enclosed within a powerful architectural complex combining strong simple volumes of square and dome with the vertical accents of the minarets. The apotheosis (deification) of stalactite decoration is found on the walls and domes of the fourteenth century Alhambra palace in Granada in southern Spain.

■ The living quarters of the palace were arranged around two open courtyards and water was circulated from them throughout the entire palace. The courtyards originally were planted with flowers and formed enclosed gardens symbolic of Paradise, an idea taken over from the ancient Persian tradition. The Islamic Paradise Garden had water in the center that was flanked on the lower tier by flowers, then higher tier bushes and finally fruit trees. Colonnades that are decorated with stone lacework of the greatest refinement enclosed the courtyards.



13-17 Muqarnas dome, Hall of the Two Sisters, Alhambra palace, Granada, Spain, 1354-1391.

■ The stalactite decoration of the Hall of the Two Sisters (13-17) is an incredible confection of elegant stucco forms. The interior was to reflect the dome of heaven and the windows piercing the dome in the Hall would bounce light off the muqarnas or stalactites and create an atmosphere of light and shadow resembling a starry sky both during the daytime hours and at night.

■ The rich repertoire of abstract motifs was used to adorn religious as well as secular buildings.



interior

### 13-11 Ext View Exterior view, Mosque of Córdoba

Moorish Portal: Arabesque above portal, South side of the Mezquita

- The profusion of repeated abstract geometric forms found in the Prayer Hall of the Great Mosque of Córdoba (13-11)



13-10 Mausoleum of the Samanids, Bukhara, Uzbekistan, early tenth century

- In the façade of the Mausoleum of the Samanids, Bukhara, Uzbekistan early 10<sup>th</sup> century (13-10) Analysis.



- Or in the tile work such as the Mihrab from Madrasa Imami, Isfahan c.1354 (13-25) are all part of a rich decorative history.
- The rich arabesques are used to create a surface decoration, pattern and bright color for flat two-dimensional surfaces.
- Perhaps the most elegant combination of form and decoration can be found in the Taj Mahal, built in the seventeenth century by one of the Muslim rulers of India, Shah Jahan, to commemorate his beloved wife, Mumtaz Mahal. The exquisite and perfectly balanced volumes of the mausoleum, its curving dome, and its minarets are echoed in the still pool. The white marble building, so delicately chiseled with arabesque designs, seems to float in the garden of paradise.

2) *The small luxury arts of carpets, metalwork and miniatures and manuscripts were a favorite form of collection among the Islamic rulers. These works demonstrated the erudition (deep and intensive learning) of the gift-giver as well as the favor and high esteem the gift receiver was held.*

The arts were so highly regarded by the rulers that royal or imperial factories were established to promote the creation of these works. For example, Shah Tahmasp of the Safavid Dynasty in Iran established a number of carpet factories. *These carpets were highly sought items and indicated the rank of the individual. The design followed the very strict precepts of non-human figuration; however, a truly masterful artist could and did create magnificent specimens.*



**13-26 MAQSUD OF KASHAN**, carpet from the funerary mosque of Shaykh Safi al-Din, Ardabil, Iran, 1540. Knotted pile of wool and silk, 34' 6" X 17' 7". Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

- The carpet (13-26) designed by Maqsud of Kashan is a beautiful blending of arabesque and color that covers the entire surface of the carpet.



**13-29 MUHAMMAD IBN AL-ZAYN**, basin (Baptistère de Saint Louis), from Egypt, ca. 1300. Brass, inlaid with gold and silver, 8 3/4" high. Louvre, Paris.

- The basin (Baptistère de Saint Louis) c.1300 (13-29) shows the excellence at which the metalworker excelled. The basin does however, conflict with the Muslim precept of figuration. It is the work of Muhammad in al-Zayn of Mamluk of Egypt.
- It has been suggested that one reason the figuration appears is the Mamluks were former Turkish slaves and that their adherence to the precepts of Islam were not as strong or rigorously followed. The scene is one of Mongols and Mamluks, enemy and hunter. It could serve as a reminder to the Mamluks of their ascendance to power after the Mongol invasions of the eastern territories and it could further serve as a reminder of the abilities of the Mamluks to withstand the Mongol aggression. But its value in the West is very clear; the basin was used as the baptismal basin for the heirs to the French royal family.

Islamic miniatures were used to tell stories of the dynasties and their heritage. These miniatures established a mythology for subsequent generations to witness and enjoy.



13-27 Sultan Muhammad the court of Gayumars detail of folio 20 verso of the *Shahnama* of Shah Tahmasp, from Tabriz, Iran, ca. 1525-1535. Ink, watercolor and gold on paper 1' 1" x 90".

Sultan Muhammad's verso from the *Shahnama* of Shah Tahmasp c.1525-35 (13-27) is such a work.

- It tells of the legendary Gayumars, first king of Iran. It details in bird's eye perspective the king with his sons and his court.
- The landscape is rich and luxuriant. The circular formation of the court and the two sons, both in white, allow the eye to move across the page easily.
- It also is a device to center the primary figure, Gayumars.
- The landscape flows outside the border and into the border, a device seen in Western manuscripts. It could be argued that the selection of the imagery, Gayumars and his court, could be an attempt to show the lineage of the Safavids and their connection to this legendary ruler. These works did influence the West and they were recognized as prized and precious objects. This does point to the excellence of the work.

#### Resources:

##### Videotapes

70

*The Battle of Poitiers* 32 min. BVL2448 \$89.95

*Christian, Jews and Moslems in Medieval Spain* 33 min. BVL1958 \$159

*Granada* 40 min. BVL2677 \$149

*Islamic Art* 32 min. BVL709 \$89.95

*Mosque* 29 min. BVL6292 \$99

*Ottoman Empire* 47 min BVL8690 \$129

##### Films for the Humanities

1-800-257-5126

<http://www.films.com>

##### Books

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Web Resources

<http://www.imarabe.org>

<http://www.sacredsites.com>

<http://isfahan.apu.ac.uk/isfahan.html>

<http://www.metmuseum.org>

<http://www.lacma.org>