

SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION

Canadian teachers are constantly searching for new resources that allow them to respond to immediate curriculum expectations while taking into consideration rapid social and cultural changes in their classrooms and communities. These changes require new information and new insights about the world: its history and its future. Museums of the 21st century play a key role in supporting teachers by offering exciting possibilities and informal learning environments that fulfill educational expectations. With its brand new galleries, classrooms, libraries, and performance spaces, the Aga Khan Museum provides teachers and students with informal yet intensive learning experiences that foster their knowledge and understanding of Canada's diverse social landscapes.

The Curriculum Resource Guide describes the knowledge and skills that students can acquire through interaction with Museum resources for in-class projects, or during a visit to the Museum with their schools.

THE AGA KHAN MUSEUM

The Aga Khan Museum is an art institution in Toronto, Canada, with an international scope and mission. It is dedicated to the collection, research, preservation, and display of works of art, objects, and artifacts of artistic, cultural, and historical significance from various periods and geographic areas where Muslim societies were predominant.



The Aga Khan Museum
in Toronto, Canada.
Photo by Tom Arban Photography.

The Aga Khan Museum's Permanent Collection is comprised of art and artifacts acquired by His Highness the Aga Khan and his family and spans over one thousand years of history. The objects – ceramic, metalwork, ivory, stone, wood, textile, and carpet; glass and rock crystal; parchment and painted manuscripts on paper – present an overview of the artistic accomplishments of Muslim civilizations from the Iberian Peninsula to China. The Museum houses and exhibits some of the most important works of Islamic art. Up to 250 pieces from the Museum's collection are showcased in a permanent gallery that combines state-of-the-art display systems with innovative approaches to design and interpretation.

The Aga Khan Museum also features:

- Three to four temporary exhibitions each year that balance work from historical periods with the creative practice of artists working today from across the Islamic world and its diaspora.
- Performances in a 350-seat auditorium featuring local, national, and international artists in dance, music, spoken word, theatre, and multidisciplinary arts.
- School programs.

The mission of the Aga Khan Museum is to build bridges between cultures by educating different audiences about the diverse heritage of Muslim civilizations. This mission is accomplished through the Museum's programmatic activities, which in turn are based on its art collection, its exhibitions, and its conferences, performances, and community projects. The role of the Museum as an educational institutional in 21st-century Canada is vitally important since the Canadian public at large knows little about the histories and contemporary contexts of Muslim civilizations but is very curious about them.

The Museum becomes a means for expanding opportunities for learning about Islam. It aims to enlarge experience, discuss knowledge interpretively, and enrich capacity to engage others in the plurality and diversity inherent in Muslim societies past and present. The Museum does not exist in isolation; it is part of a process of dialogue on social practices to achieve pedagogies that support students' explorations of these complex issues.



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT ISLAM, THE AGA KHAN MUSEUM, AND ARTS OF MUSLIM CIVILIZATIONS

WHAT DO THE WORDS ISLAM AND MUSLIM MEAN?

Islam, like Judaism and Christianity, is a monotheistic religious tradition that is based on the belief in God, Creation, and the Day of Judgment. Its followers are called Muslims.

WHAT DO MUSLIMS BELIEVE?

Muslims believe that the Qur'an is the Word of God revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century CE. The central message of the Qur'an is for humanity to believe in and worship God and to live by a set of ethical principles of peace, tolerance, and service to others. The Qur'an also contains histories, parables, and stories that teach life lessons and have inspired great art.

ARE ALL MUSLIMS THE SAME?

Muslims' belief in God and the centrality of the Qur'an does not imply sameness. The diversity of Muslims is reflected in their arts as well as in their religious practices and interpretations. Muslims live in more than fifty-seven countries, with substantial populations in Europe, North America, Africa, and South and Southeast Asia, and they speak and use many languages, including Chinese, English, Malay, Dari, and Swahili.



WHAT IS ISLAMIC ART?

In its simplest definition, “Islamic art” encompasses all the arts produced in the lands where Islam is the dominant religion and culture, regardless of the function of the art piece or the religious affiliation of its patron or maker. Islamic art thus is not limited to the arts specifically linked to the religion of Islam, such as places of worship or objects of liturgical relevance, but includes paintings, ceramics, and other secular objects that offer insights into the many different ways people live and express their responses to their environments. Therefore, art is a cultural production reflecting the social, political, and economic context in which it was produced and/or used.

WHO IS THE AGA KHAN?

His Highness the Aga Khan, the founder and chairman of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), is the 49th hereditary Imam (Spiritual Leader) of the Shia Ismaili Muslims. In Islam’s ethical tradition, religious leaders not only interpret the faith but also have a responsibility to help improve the quality of life in their community and in the societies amongst which they live. For His Highness the Aga Khan, this has meant a deep engagement with development for over 50 years through the agencies of the AKDN.

WHAT KINDS OF WORKS OF ART ARE IN THE AGA KHAN MUSEUM COLLECTION?

About half of the Museum collection comprises works on paper, including manuscripts, individual folios of calligraphy, miniature paintings, and related documents. The remainder of the collection is three-dimensional objects such as ceramics, metalwork, jewellery, architectural elements, textiles, and glass.

MANY PEOPLE SAY THAT ISLAM PROHIBITS THE DEPICTION OF LIVING BEINGS. WHY ARE THERE SO MANY IMAGES OF PEOPLE AND ANIMALS ON THE WORKS OF ART?

Islamic art and architecture specifically for religious use, for example, in the decoration of a mosque or in a copy of the Qur’an, does not have images of humans or animals, but secular arts have historically depicted living beings.



WHAT DOES THE CALLIGRAPHY (DECORATIVE WRITING) ON THE OBJECTS AND PAINTINGS MEAN? IS IT MEANT TO BE READ?

Calligraphy is used for its decorative effect and for its content to embellish material objects and architecture. It is a highly developed art that is often appreciated less for its legibility and more for its form and the skill of the calligrapher.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN THEMES FOR PAINTINGS IN ISLAMIC ART?

Similar to other cultures, in the medieval period Muslim artists chose scenes of animals and hunting, historical narratives and epic poems, and famous battles as the topics of their paintings. In later periods portraiture was added as a style of painting, influenced by trade and political encounters with Europe.

WHAT IS THE SHAH-NAMEH?

The *Shah-Nameh* is an epic poem written by the poet Ferdowsi in the late 10th/early 11th centuries in Iran. It recounts the stories and fables of ancient Iran from its creation in ancient times to the Arab conquests in the 7th century. Rostam and Bahram Gur, two of the *Shah-Nameh*'s most famous heroes, are featured in the paintings in this *Curriculum Resource Guide*. Take a look at Figures 16, 41, 45, 55, and 56. The painting in Figure 9 also illustrates a story from the *Shah-Nameh*; in the painting, Haftvad's daughter finds a worm in an apple and nurtures it until it grows into a monstrous dragon.

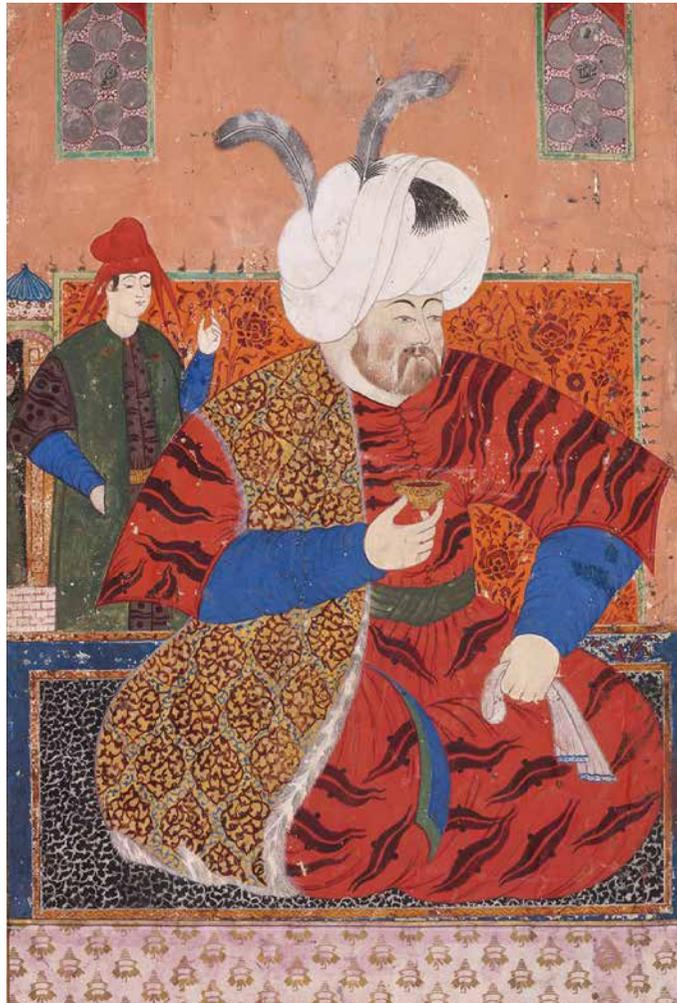


THE ARTS OF MUSLIM SOCIETIES: CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

The visual arts that were produced in regions where Islam was the predominant religion and culture are usually referred to under the collective name *Islamic art*. This term has a broad definition that includes manuscript illumination and painting; objects made out of glass, ceramics, metal, wood, ivory, and textile; and architecture. It is not restricted to the arts and material culture that relate to Islam as a religion, nor is it limited to objects and spaces related to Muslim ritual practices.

The term *Islamic art* is inadequate to describe the vast diversity of art forms that have developed across expanses of Europe, Africa, and Asia, from Spain in the west to China in the east, and from the 7th century up to today. The *Curriculum Resource Guide* looks at the arts of Muslim societies as multiple and innovative forms whose development has continually influenced and been influenced by other regions and other cultures.

Figure 2:
Portrait of Sultan Selim II
Istanbul, Turkey, ca. 1570
Opaque watercolour and gold on paper
44.2 x 31.2 cm
AKM219



The Turkish Ottoman Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent (reigned 1520–66) had this inscription carved on one of his monumental buildings:

I am Suleyman and my name is being read in the prayers in the Holy cities of Islam. I launched fleets in the Mediterranean against the Franks in the Maghreb as well as in the Indian Ocean. I am the Shah of Baghdad and Iraq, the Caesar of the Roman lands and the Sultan of Egypt...

Just as Suleyman declared himself the heir of Roman, Sassanian, and Byzantine cultures, Muslim artists and artisans drew upon the accomplishments of ancient civilizations and developed them further, often to a very high degree. Through trade routes that had already been well established between continents in the ancient world, Muslims shared the results of this artistic production with the world. Materials, goods, and aesthetic approaches formed knowledge networks that contributed to creativity wherever artists were exposed to them and learned how to use them.

Paper was one material that travelled westward from China and dramatically changed the artistic production of the Muslim world. Early copies of the Qur'an, the Muslim holy book, were written on animal skin (parchment), but by the 8th century CE papermaking technology had reached Baghdad from the Far East. Copies of the Qur'an, the Muslim holy book, show a great diversity of expression – there are examples in the Aga Khan Museum's Permanent Collection from all parts of Asia as well as Spain and Africa – but they also show how, based on the evidence, Muslims took a lot of care, and at great expense, to beautify this Holy Book.

Ceramics also moved along trade routes as artists widely travelled to distant regions. They carried patterns, decorative styles, and technological innovations that artists adapted as they created new products with available raw materials. The history of ceramics provides many examples of this. For example, artists in 9th-century Baghdad had no clay that could duplicate the hard, white ceramic bodies of Chinese ceramics, so they developed a white glaze opacified with tin that imitates the look. This innovation spread to Egypt, Iran, and Spain before reaching Renaissance Italy.



Art objects can demonstrate how important the transmission of knowledge between different cultures and distant regions was for the advancement not only of artistic expertise, but also of scientific, medical, and engineering knowledge. One of the objects on show at the Aga Khan Museum is the *Canon* by Ibn Sina, a 10th-century philosopher who is considered the father of modern medicine. The *Canon* is both an illustrated manuscript handwritten on paper and a medical treatise. It exemplifies how Muslim scientists translated and developed Pre-Islamic knowledge from different sources, including Greeks, Indians, and Chinese. A 14th-century Spanish astrolabe is a masterwork of silver-inlaid bronze, a testament to pluralism through its inscriptions in Latin, Arabic, and Hebrew, and a scientific instrument. Both the *Canon* and the astrolabe are on show at the Aga Khan Museum.



Figure 3:
Planispheric Astrolabe
Spain (Historic al-Andalus), 14th century
Bronze inlaid with silver
Diameter: 13.5 cm
AKM611

With objects like these, the *Curriculum Resource Guide* shows teachers how they can bring artistic and social histories to life for their students through their discovery of exhibitions, performances, and works of art in the Museum's collection.

