

E D U C A T I O N

PRE-VISIT GUIDE
FOR K-12 EDUCATORS

ART OF THE ARAB LANDS, TURKEY, IRAN, CENTRAL ASIA, AND LATER SOUTH ASIA

Use this guide to prepare for your self-guided visit to the Metropolitan Museum with your students.

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



Use this guide to prepare for your self-guided visit to the Metropolitan Museum with your students.

Introduction

More than one thousand objects from the Metropolitan’s renowned collection of [Islamic art](#)—one of the most comprehensive in the world—are on view in the Galleries for the Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia. The featured works of art, dating from the seventh to the late nineteenth century, reflect the rich diversity, complexity, and interconnectedness of the numerous cultures represented in the Islamic world. An extensive use of Arabic script and lavish embellishment, as well as the technical mastery of a wide range of media, are evident in both secular and religious works spanning this vast time period and geographic expanse.

Highlights of the collection include: the Damascus Room, a winter reception room from an affluent home in Ottoman Syria; notable early and medieval Qur’ans; pages from the sumptuous illustrated manuscript of the *Book of Kings (Shahnama)* created for Shah Tahmasp (r. 1514–76) of Persia (Iran); outstanding miniatures from the courts of the Arab world, Ottoman Turkey, Iran, and Mughal India, including paintings from the “Shah Jahan Album,” compiled for the builder of the Taj Mahal; and architectural elements including a fourteenth-century prayer niche (*mihrab*) decorated with cut glazed ceramic tiles that indicated the direction of prayer in a theological school in Isfahan, Iran.

The Galleries

The Galleries for the Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia are on the second floor at the south end of the Museum. The regional presentation of the works of art in the collection draws attention to the plurality of the Islamic tradition and cross-fertilization of ideas and artistic forms. This approach stresses regional traditions and their cultural contexts, rather than presenting the art and culture of the Islamic world as a single monolithic entity dominated by religion. Instead, Islam is regarded as a unifying force that connected this vast geographic expanse through the centuries. In sequence, the fifteen galleries trace the course of Islamic civilization over a span of thirteen centuries from the Middle East to North Africa, Europe, and Central and South Asia:

Gallery 450 Introductory gallery (Patti Cadby Birch Gallery): showcases masterpieces from across the collection in a range of media.

Gallery 451 Arab Lands and Iran in the Umayyad and Abbasid Periods (7th–13th centuries): features early Islamic art, focusing primarily on the Umayyad dynasty (661–750), whose capital was Damascus (in present-day Syria), and the Early Abbasid dynasty (750–ca. 900), which was based in Baghdad (in present-day Iraq).

Gallery 452 Nishapur and the Sabz Pushan Site: presents materials excavated by the Iranian Expedition of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in several digs from 1935 to 1947.

Gallery 453 Iran and Central Asia (9th–13th centuries): focuses on the impact of the distinctive style and innovative techniques introduced by the Abbasid caliphate in the eastern Islamic world.

Gallery 454 Egypt and Syria (10th–16th centuries): offers a comprehensive display of the three major periods in the medieval history of Cairo—the Fatimid (909–1171), Ayyubid (1169–1260), and Mamluk (1250–1517). It also provides a point of entry to related material in the Orientalism section of the adjacent 19th- and Early 20th-Century European Paintings and Sculpture Galleries.

Gallery 456 Moroccan Court (Patti Cadby Birch Court): was constructed by craftsmen from Fez as an intimate interior court based on late medieval Moroccan design. Original Nasrid columns (from Islamic Spain) define the patio space, and dadoes (wall panels) of custom-made glazed tiles set in a traditional pattern frame a fountain.

Gallery 457 Spain, North Africa, and the Western Mediterranean (8th–19th centuries) (Patti Cadby Birch Gallery): illuminates the spread of Arab influence to the West through the rich material culture of Al-Andalus (Islamic Spain). The objects in this gallery demonstrate the reciprocal creative exchanges between southern Islamic courts and northern Christian- and Judaeo-Spanish areas.

Gallery 458 The Hagop Kevorkian Fund Special Exhibitions Gallery

Galleries 459 and 460 Carpets, Textiles, and the Greater Ottoman World and Arts of the Ottoman Court (14th–20th centuries) (Koç Family Galleries): showcase the rich diversity of Ottoman courtly, provincial, and village art.

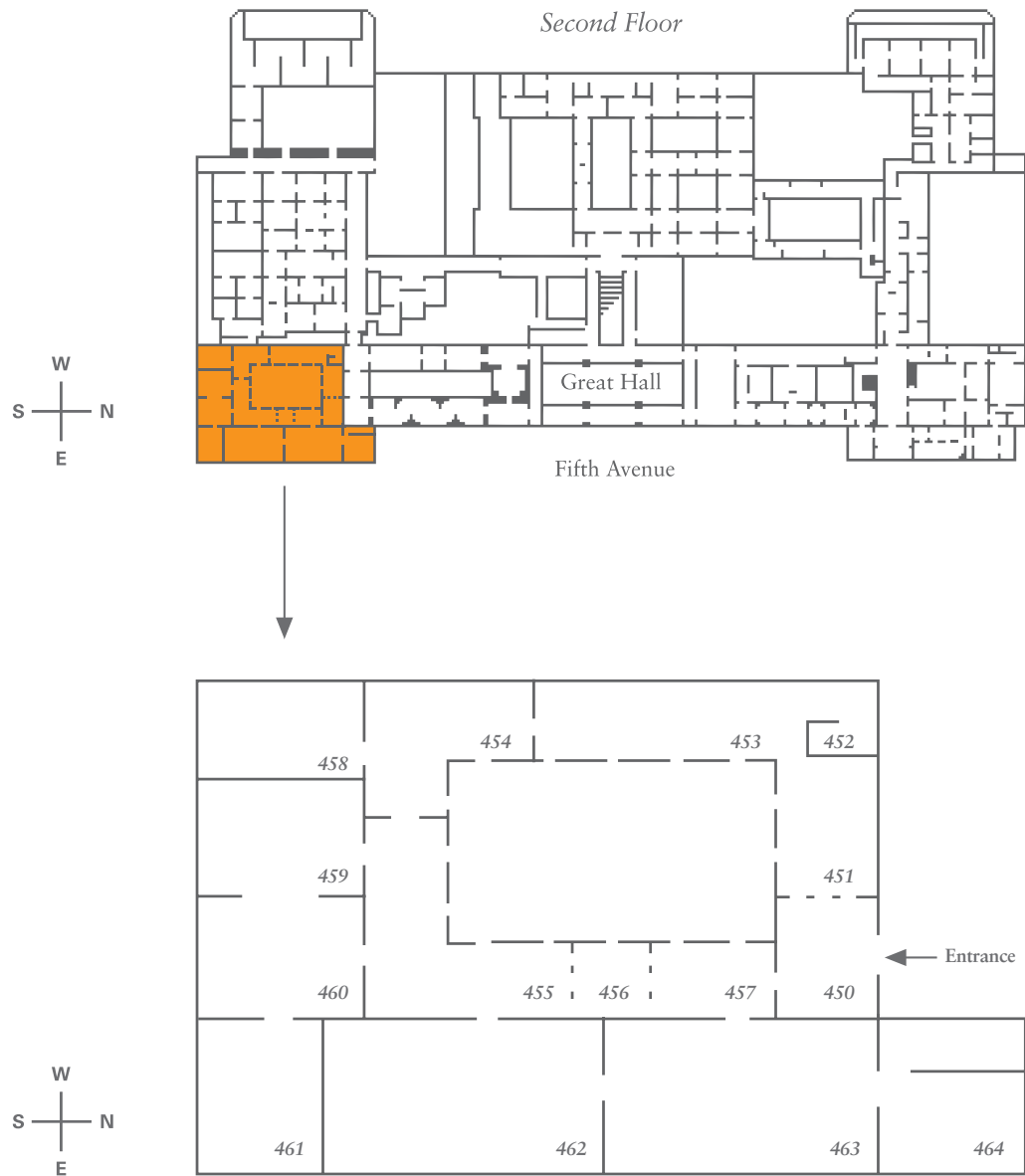
Gallery 461 The Damascus Room (18th century): a reception chamber from an upper-class home in Ottoman Damascus (in present-day Syria).

Galleries 455 and 462 Iran and Central Asia (13th–16th centuries) and Safavid and Later Iran (16th–20th centuries) (Sharmin and Bijan Mossavar-Rahmani Gallery): provide a chronological overview of the art of the Persian world, underscoring its many connections with other cultures. Gallery 455 includes material from the Mongol, Turkmen, Timurid, and Uzbek dynasties, while gallery 462 features masterpieces created in Tabriz and Isfahan under the imperial Safavid dynasty and its successors.

Galleries 463 and 464 Mughal South Asia (16th–19th centuries) and Later South Asia (16th–20th centuries): highlight the artistic and cultural diversity of the Indian subcontinent and its wider connections with the Islamic world, Europe, and beyond.

Please Note: *Most of the suggested works featured in this guide will be on view when you visit the Museum. However, certain installations—such as those displaying textiles and works on paper—will change frequently due to the sensitivity of these materials to light. We recommend that you either visit the Museum prior to bringing your school group to plan your tour, or use the online [Search the Collections](#) tool to verify that each work of art on which you want to focus is on view.*

*New Galleries for the Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia,
and Later South Asia*



Planning a Tour

When visiting the Metropolitan Museum with your students, prepare your tour with the following in mind:

- Less is more. Select four to five works of art to discuss over the course of an hour in the galleries.
- Choose works that are located away from doorways and areas that are heavily traversed by visitors.
- Include works that are easily visible to all students in your group for purposes of discussion and viewing.
- Make sure that there are enough chaperones in your group to divide the students into smaller groups for gallery discussions.
- While touring the galleries, please give priority to lecturers wearing Museum IDs who are guiding groups. If they are discussing a work that you would like your students to see, please select another object to view and discuss until they are finished.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art's school tour program is made possible by the generosity of Lewis B. and Dorothy Cullman.

Questions for Discussion in the Galleries

- What stands out as you take your first look?
- What do you notice about the artist's selection and use of materials?
- Describe any text, imagery, or geometric forms you see. What do you notice about their arrangement?
- What function might this object have? What do you see that makes you say that?
- Who might own or use an object like this? What clues support your idea?
- If you were describing this work to someone who had never seen it before, what adjectives would you use? Why?
- What might this object convey about the person/culture that created it?

Suggested Works of Art to Explore

Please note that titles, dates, and other object information on the website and in gallery signage may vary as the result of ongoing research. The images below are details. Use the links to view the full works of art and learn more about each.



[Carpet with Triple-arch Design](#), ca. 1575–90; Ottoman period
(ca. 1299–1923)

Attributed to Turkey, probably Istanbul

Silk (warp and weft), wool (pile), cotton (pile); asymmetrically knotted pile
50 x 68 in. (127 x 172.7 cm)

The James F. Ballard Collection, Gift of James F. Ballard, 1922 (22.100.51)

Learn more about [The Art of the Ottomans before 1600](#).



[Textile Fragment](#), 14th century; Nasrid period (1232–1492)

Probably Spain

Silk; lampas

40 3/16 x 14 5/16 in. (102 x 36.3 cm)

Fletcher Fund, 1929 (29.22)

Learn more about [Geometric Patterns in Islamic Art](#).

Learn more about [The Nature of Islamic Art](#).

Learn more about [The Art of the Nasrid Period \(1232–1492\)](#).



[Bowl with Arabic Inscription](#), 10th century; Samanid period (819–1005)

Attributed to Iran, Nishapur

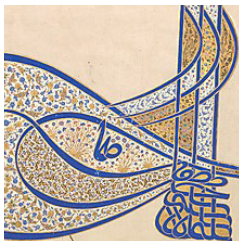
Earthenware; white slip with black-slip decoration under transparent glaze

H. 7 in. (17.8 cm), Diam. 18 in. (45.7 cm)

Rogers Fund, 1965 (65.106.2)

Learn more about [Calligraphy in Islamic Art](#).

Learn more about [The Nature of Islamic Art](#).



[Tughra \(Official Signature\) of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent](#)
(r. 1520–66), ca. 1555–60; Ottoman period (ca. 1299–1923)

Attributed to Turkey, Istanbul

Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper

20 1/2 x 25 3/8 in. (52.1 x 64.5 cm)

Rogers Fund, 1938 (38.149.1)

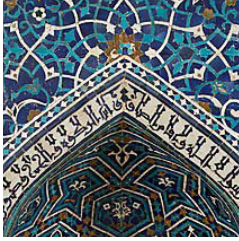
Learn more about [The Age of Süleyman the Magnificent \(r. 1520–1566\)](#).

Learn more about [The Art of the Ottomans before 1600](#).

Learn more about [Calligraphy in Islamic Art](#).

Learn more about [The Nature of Islamic Art](#).

Learn more about [Vegetal Patterns in Islamic Art](#).



Mihrab (Prayer Niche), A.H. 755 / A.D. 1354–55

Iran, Isfahan

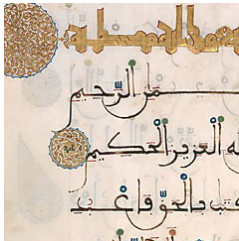
Mosaic of polychrome-glazed cut tiles on stonepaste body;
set into mortar

135 1/16 x 113 11/16 in. (343.1 x 288.7 cm)

Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1939 (39.20)

Learn more about [The Art of the Ilkhanid Period \(1256–1353\)](#).

Learn more about [Vegetal Patterns in Islamic Art](#).



Leaf from a Qur'an Manuscript, late 13th–early 14th century;

Nasrid period (1232–1492)

Spain

Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on parchment

21 1/16 x 22 in. (53.5 x 55.9 cm)

Rogers Fund, 1942 (42.63)

Learn more about [The Art of the Nasrid Period \(1232–1492\)](#).

Learn more about [Calligraphy in Islamic Art](#).



The Emperor Shah Jahan with his son Dara Shikoh: Folio from the Shah Jahan Album (verso), ca. 1620; Mughal period (1526–1858)

Painter: Nanha

Attributed to India

Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper

15 5/16 x 10 5/16 in. (38.9 x 26.2 cm)

Purchase, Rogers Fund and The Kevorkian Foundation Gift, 1955
(55.121.10.36)

Learn more about [The Art of the Mughals after 1600](#).

Learn more about [The Shah Jahan Album](#).



Astrolabe of 'Umar ibn Yusuf ibn 'Umar ibn 'Ali ibn Rasul al-Muzaffari,

dated A.H. 690/A.D. 1291; Rasulid period (1228–1454)

Yemen

Brass; cast and hammered, pierced, chased, inlaid with silver

Case (a): Max. W. 7 5/8 in. (19.4 cm), Diam. 6 1/8 in. (15.6 cm), D. 1/4 in.

(0.6 cm); Bar with attached nail (b): Max. H. 1 7/8 in. (4.8 cm), Max. W.

1 1/8 in. (2.9 cm), L. 5 in. (12.7 cm); Net (c): Diam. 5 in. (12.7 cm); Plates

(d–g): Diam. 5 in. (12.7 cm); Pin (h): L. 1 3/4 in. (4.4 cm), W. 1/2 in. (1.3 cm)

Edward C. Moore Collection, Bequest of Edward C. Moore, 1891

(91.1.535a–h)

Learn more about [Astronomy and Astrology in the Medieval Islamic World](#).



[The Feast of Sada: Folio from the *Shahnama* \(Book of Kings\) of Shah](#)

[Tahmasp](#), ca. 1525; Safavid period (1501–1722)

Painter (attributed to): Sultan Muhammad (active first half of 16th century); Poet: Abu'l Qasim Firdausi (935–1020)

Iran, Tabriz

Opaque watercolor, ink, silver, and gold on paper

18 1/2 x 12 1/2 in. (47 x 32.1 cm)

Gift of Arthur A. Houghton Jr., 1970 (1970.301.2)

Learn more about [The Art of the Safavids before 1600](#).

Learn more about [The Shahnama of Shah Tahmasp](#).



[Calligraphic Galleon](#), dated A.H. 1180/A.D. 1766–67; Ottoman period (ca. 1299–1923)

Calligrapher: ‘Abdal al-Qadir Hisari

Turkey

Ink and gold on paper

19 x 17 in. (48.3 x 43.2 cm)

Louis E. and Theresa S. Seley Purchase Fund for Islamic Art and Rogers Fund, 2003 (2003.241)

Learn more about [Amulets and Talismans from the Islamic World](#).



[Dish Depicting Two Birds among Flowering Plants](#), ca. 1575–90;

Ottoman period (1299–1923)

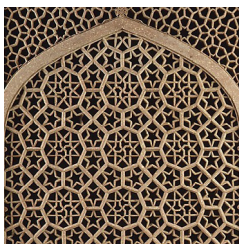
Turkey, Iznik

Stonepaste; polychrome painted under transparent glaze

Diam. 11 3/16 in. (28.4 cm), H. 2 3/8 in. (5.1 cm)

Gift of James J. Rorimer in appreciation of Maurice Dimand’s curatorship, 1933–1959, 1959 (59.69.1)

Learn more about [The Art of the Ottomans before 1600](#).



[Jali Screen](#) (one of a pair), second half of 16th century; Mughal period (1526–1858)

India

Red sandstone; pierced, carved

73 x 51 5/16 x 3 1/4 in. (185.4 x 130.3 x 8.3 cm)

Rogers Fund, 1993 (1993.67.2)

Learn more about [The Art of the Mughals before 1600](#).

Learn more about [Geometric Patterns in Islamic Art](#).

Learn more about [The Nature of Islamic Art](#).

Teaching Themes

In addition to exploring works of art according to when, where, and by whom they were created—as they are organized in the galleries—it can be useful to engage in thematic explorations of objects produced by disparate cultures and communities over vast expanses of time. Use the following thematic entry points to the collection (with related works of art) as a framework to support a range of subject areas:

The Art of Islam

Islam spread over territories with rich and well-established cultural and artistic traditions. The changes that occurred with the arrival of the new religion and political order generated a gradual shift in the artwork produced in these regions, and distinct Islamic regional styles eventually developed. Although the areas represented in the galleries were culturally and religiously diverse (including Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Zoroastrian, and Buddhist communities), Muslims ruled these regions for long periods of time and works of art were largely commissioned by Muslim patrons.

[Prayer Carpet](#) (22.100.51)

[Mihrab \(Prayer Niche\)](#) (39.20)

[Leaf from a Qur'an Manuscript](#) (42.63)

[Astrolabe](#) (91.1.535a–h)

The Art of Writing

Calligraphy is considered the quintessential art form of the Islamic world, with Arabic letters decorating every type of object, from buildings to bowls. This interest in calligraphy and its ornamental possibilities is directly linked to the exalted place of the Qur'an in Muslim societies. Numerous scripts have emerged over the centuries and are used for a multitude of religious, political, social, and cultural functions.

[Bowl with Arabic Inscription](#) (65.106.2)

[Tughra \(Official Signature\) of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent](#) (38.149.1)

[Mihrab \(Prayer Niche\)](#) (39.20)

[Leaf from a Qur'an Manuscript](#) (42.63)

[Calligraphic Galleon](#) (2003.241)

Court Art

The patronage of the ruler and his court was paramount in many regions of the Islamic world. With unparalleled access to funds, fine materials, and the most talented artists, court workshops supported the production of sumptuous goods and fostered the transmission of motifs and styles from one medium to another as artists worked together in a collaborative environment.

[Prayer Carpet](#) (22.100.51)

[Textile Fragment](#) (29.22)

[Tughra \(Official Signature\) of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent \(38.149.1\)](#)
[The Emperor Shah Jahan with His Son Dara Shikoh: Folio from the Shah Jahan Album \(55.121.10.36\)](#)
[The Feast of Sada: Folio from the *Shahnama* \(Book of Kings\) of Shah Tahmasp \(1970.301.2\)](#)
[Calligraphic Galleon \(2003.241\)](#)
[Dish Depicting Two Birds among Flowering Plants \(59.69.1\)](#)
[Jali Screen \(1993.67.2\)](#)

Geometry

One of the defining characteristics of Islamic art is the abundant use of geometric patterns to adorn a wide variety of architectural and decorative surfaces—evidence of the importance of geometry as a principle art form across the Islamic world. Symmetry and the potential for infinite repetition of patterns are central features of this form of Islamic ornament.

[Textile Fragment \(29.22\)](#)
[Jali Screen \(1993.67.2\)](#)

The Natural World

Nature inspired artists and scientists across the Islamic world. Scientific instruments such as the astrolabe drew upon careful observation of the stars and planets as a means to calculate prayer times and identify the direction of Mecca, which Muslims face during prayer. Ottoman potters and Mughal and Safavid painters depicted plant and animal forms, displaying a strong interest in observing the natural environment. Although paintings of people and animals are often considered inappropriate subjects in religious art and architecture, they abound in private and secular contexts throughout most of the Islamic world.

[The Emperor Shah Jahan with His Son Dara Shikoh: Folio from the Shah Jahan Album \(55.121.10.36\)](#)
[Astrolabe \(91.1.535a–h\)](#)
[The Feast of Sada: Folio from the *Shahnama* \(Book of Kings\) of Shah Tahmasp \(1970.301.2\)](#)
[Dish Depicting Two Birds among Flowering Plants \(59.69.1\)](#)

Further Background on the Museum's Website

Use the following links to a selection of thematic essays on the Museum's [Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History](#) to help you prepare for your visit:

[The Birth of Islam](#)
[Calligraphy in Islamic Art](#)
[The Nature of Islamic Art](#)
[Vegetal Patterns in Islamic Art](#)
[Geometric Patterns in Islamic Art](#)
[The Arts of the Book in the Islamic World, 1600–1800](#)
[Figural Representation in Islamic Art](#)

Selected Resources

These and many more resources are available in [Nolen Library](#) in the Ruth and Harold D. Uris Center for Education.

Armstrong, Karen. *Islam: A Short History*. New York: Modern Library, 2000.

Blair, Sheila, and Jonathan Bloom. *The Art and Architecture of Islam 1250–1800*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.

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Brend, Barbara. *Islamic Art*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992.

Ekhtiar, Maryam D., Priscilla P. Soucek, Sheila R. Canby, and Navina Najat Haidar, eds. *Masterpieces from the Department of Islamic Art in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.

Ettinghausen, Richard, Oleg Grabar, and Marilyn Jenkins-Madina. *Islamic Art and Architecture 650–1250*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003.

Gardner, Robert. *Islam: Empire of Faith*. DVD. Distributed by PBS Home Video: 2000.

Irwin, Robert. *Islamic Art in Context*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1997.

[Islamic Art and Geometric Design: Activities for Learning](#). New York: MMA, 2004.

Stanley, Tim. *Palace and Mosque: Islamic Art from the Middle East*. London: V & A Publications, 2004.