



The Arabic script

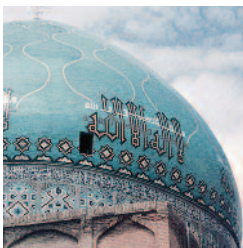
Anyone who deals with art and crafts from the Islamic world soon notices the prominent role of the Arabic script. Arabic words – either alone or as part of a larger decoration – are found on dishes, carpets, coins, and buildings.



The conspicuous importance of the Arabic script is closely related to the holy book of Islam, the Koran. As God's word was written down with the Arabic alphabet, its script became almost divine. But religious texts are not the only kind that we can expect to find in Islamic art. Arabic inscriptions can also consist of good wishes for the owner of a work of art or take the form of an ambiguous play on words, among other things.



The Arabic script is one of a number of Semitic alphabets that are all read from right to left. There are 28 letters in the Arabic alphabet, in addition to a number of diacritical marks, and there are many different script types.



One special phenomenon found in Islamic art is the use of letter-like forms that actually make no sense. They might have been made by illiterates, but also by craftsmen versed in Arabic who wanted to use the prestigious Arabic alphabet without conveying a specific message. These forms are called pseudo-calligraphy.

Having fine handwriting and a good command of the language are considered admirable traits in the Arab world. A person who has something important to say, or simply wants to seem convincing, can gain special attention and respect by speaking and writing beautiful Arabic.

DURING THE GUIDED TOUR OF THE MUSEUM:

When pupils are shown around the museum, they will see the many wonderful forms of the Arabic script, in everything from the earliest Korans to monumental wall decorations. The role of the calligrapher will be highlighted and, depending on the work of art, the relevant historical and cultural aspects will also be discussed.





Good questions – and answers

What does calligraphy mean?

The word calligraphy comes from Greek and means beautiful writing. A calligrapher is a person who masters the art of writing beautifully. The art of calligraphy is cultivated in many cultures, but is especially prominent in the Islamic world.

Are Arabic letters used for languages other than Arabic?

Yes, the Arabic alphabet – with a few alterations – is also used for a number of other languages, such as Farsi in Iran, Pashto in Afghanistan, Urdu in Pakistan, and Kurdish in Iraq. Turkish (until 1928) and Swahili were also formerly written with the Arabic alphabet. Only the Latin alphabet is more widespread than the Arabic.

What language is the Koran written in?

In principle, the Koran can be written in every language. However, Muslims commonly believe that since the Koran was revealed in Arabic and was written down in this language, it is the one preferred by God. Artistically conceived Koran quotations in Arabic are found everywhere in the world where Islam is the dominant religion.

Can people still read the Arabic inscriptions from the time of the Prophet Muhammad?

Yes, the Arabic language has not changed so much that a person who can read standard Arabic today would have much difficulty reading the old texts. The Arabic script, however, has developed in many different directions, and some types may be difficult to read.

Are different script types used for different purposes?

Yes, there are many traditions for using a specific type for a specific purpose. Many early Korans, for example, were written in a sharp and slightly angular version of the Arabic script called *Kufi*. The easily legible cursive *Naskh* was often used for ordinary, non-religious documents, and capital headings and large-scale texts frequently made use of the monumental script *Thuluth*. The Ottoman Empire's administration had its own flowing script, called *Divani*, and Iranian poetry featured the elegant *Nastaliq* – also known as the “hanging” script.