Plant-based Decoration in Islamic Art

Introduction

Exploring Plant based decoration is an easily accessible way to appreciate and understand Islam and Islamic Art and Design. The abundance and variety of flower motifs and pattern continue to influence artists and designers today. In Islamic societies floral patterns were applied to a huge range of artefacts and objects, from coffee cups to compasses. As Islam spread from Spain to the Indonesian Archipelago, designs evolved and adapted reflecting time and place.
Born locally in Walthamstow, the renowned designer, William Morris, developed many textile and wallpaper designs inspired by the patterns and motifs that he admired in Islamic art.

Islamic floral motifs, abstract, stylised and representational, offer opportunities to explore a variety of mediums and design principles in architecture, art design and technology. Religion, Geography, History and Science can be explored through a range of artworks that were inspired and influenced by beliefs and practicalities of worship. Materials used internally and externally will reflect the weather and availability of resources as well as the local culture. So that prayer mats were often made from reed in Africa but patterned patchwork in Cyprus, likewise Mosques built in Poland were traditionally made of wood whilst in China the mosques reflect the pagoda style architecture.

Cross fertilisation of ideas, products and designs occurred through trade and during the pilgrimage of Haj where a range of cultures and ethnicities met annually in Makkah. In Chapter 49 Verse 13 of the Quran Allah tells Muhammed (pbuh) ‘Mankind! We created You from a single pair of a male and a female, And made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (Not that you may despise each other)’.
Origins

Plant-based patterns used on their own or combined with other design elements in Islamic Art; calligraphy, geometry and figurative, adorn a huge number of buildings, manuscripts, objects and textiles. Patterns based on plants have always been particularly popular and as many craftsmen became Muslim, pre Islamic motifs were assimilated and a profusion of designs emerged throughout the Muslim world.

Inspiration

Islamic Art took its inspiration directly from the Quran as well as Quranic descriptions of Paradise and directives to seek knowledge. The Quran repeatedly mentions the marvels of nature as among Allah’s signs insisting Muslims take note and meditate on them. In Chapter 7 Verse 56 the Quran tells Muslims that ‘The mercy of Allah is near to those who do what is beautiful’. Muslims are also encouraged to embrace the diversity and cultures of the Muslim world in one Ummah, a world-wide community of believers. ‘Mankind! We created You from a single pair of a male and a female, And made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (Not that you may despise each other) Quran Chapter 49 Verse 13. This atmosphere of art and learning saw a sophisticated secular art develop as an integral part of Islamic Culture.
Quranic

The emergence of Islamic Art reflects many aspects of Islam as a faith and way of life. The Quran contains the revelations sent down to the Prophet Muhammed (pbuh) through the angel Gabriel from God. These form the basis of Islamic belief and calligraphy of the sacred text is considered by many Muslims as the highest form of Islamic Art. Calligraphers adorned and illuminated the sacred text with exquisite and intricate flower patterns reflecting love and passion for their new religion. As images are not used on buildings or artefacts used in worship these too were decorated with superb floral designs.
Gardens

Gardens occupy a special place, as spaces of contemplation and an earthly reflection of paradise, in the imagination of Islamic Artists. However the idea of paradise as a garden pre dates the three Abrahamic traditions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam by centuries and is an almost universal concept symbolic of bliss and peace. ‘Therein they shall hear no idle talk, no cause of sin, only the saying ‘Peace, Peace”’ can be found in Chapter 56, Verse 24. There are over 120 references in the Quran to Paradise which is described as a beautiful garden containing an abundance of vines, delicately perfumed by flowering and fruit laden trees refreshed by shimmering fountains and rippling streams. According to some scholars the plants represent a profound symbolism and the four gardens of Paradise a spiritual journey. In the Garden of the Spirit grows a Date Palm whilst the Garden of Essence contains the Pomegranate tree. In the Garden of the Soul grows the Olive tree and the Fig can be found in the Garden of the Heart (based on Martin Lings’ interpretation in his Book of Certainty, The Islamic Texts Society 1992).
Abstract Art

A celebrated feature of Islamic art is an enthusiasm for abstract and stylised flowers. Naturalistic plant forms were abstracted through design and a proliferation of bold and imaginative motifs developed.

Even though Muslim artists were quite capable of and did draw naturalistically they generally chose not to copy directly from nature but rather to invent flowers from their imagination. Inspired by the Quranic vision of Paradise they created flowers that were not of this world but symbolic of paradise. The archetypal floral forms were then applied to elaborate patterns. Such complex and intricate designs create an illusion of unending repetition that were intended to remind believers of the infinite nature of God.

Science

Artists and scientists have always been acute observers of the world and in Islamic societies scientific research endorsed religious beliefs. The Quran and the Hadith, the sayings of the Prophet Muhammed, (pbuh) fostered and encouraged an atmosphere of intellectual and scientific investigation as Muslims had a religious duty to ‘seek knowledge’. Floral patterns were used to adorn scientific instruments including astrolabes and compasses. Numerous illustrated treatises were written about seeds, flowers and plants including their physical and medicinal properties. In Spain Muslim botanists and agriculturists brought and cultivated apricots and citrus fruits from China, bananas from Indonesia and sugarcane from India. For the first time Europe, which previously had known only linen and wool, was introduced to and able to cultivate cotton from India and silk from China. The
Prophet Muhammed (pbuh) spoke of the health benefits of Black Seed and Fenugreek Seeds and his favourite fragrance was Rose. Rose scented water is often sprinkled in Mosques and used to clean hands at the table before and after meals. Orange flower, Neroli and Rose flavourings are still used to flavour desserts and drinks.

Travel

A unique feature of Islamic Society was the mobility of its population. The Prophet Muhammed (pbuh) came from families who had previously established two great caravan routes of and He was proposed to and married an established merchant. Furthermore one of the important duties of a Muslim was to make pilgrimage to Makkah and the Prophet (pbuh) was reported to have encouraged boys and girls to travel as far as China if it was beneficial for their education. This incentive to embrace and learn from foreigners and travel gave wonderful opportunities to Islamic artists to absorb new ideas and influences from all over the world and are reflected in their art.

The prophet Muhammed (pbuh) was born in 570 AD in Makkah and died in Madinah in 632 AD in Arabia. By 711 Muslims entered Spain and began five centuries of Islamic rule. The world’s oldest University Al-Azhar was founded in Cairo, Egypt in 970 AD. Jerusalem was reclaimed from the Crusaders in 1187 by Salah ud-Din, respected adversary of Richard the Lion Heart. In 1453 Constantinople (Istanbul) became the capital of the Ottoman Turks whose empire had by the 1520’s spread to include south-east Europe, including Hungary, the Middle East and north Africa. From India Islam spread to Sumatra where in 1550 a Muslim kingdom was established and from there the new faith began to influence Java, the Moluccas and Borneo. The 17th Century became the ‘golden age’ of
Islam in Indonesia. In 1809 Usman dan Fodio founded the Khaliphate of Sokoto in Nigeria.

Here in the UK, in 1889 Henry William Quilliam a convert to Islam opened the Liverpool Mosque. This was soon followed in 1894 by Britain’s first purpose-built mosque in Woking, Surrey. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire and Khalifate in the 1920s along with the end of European colonialism in the Middle East and Asia led to the migration of Muslims to Europe, the USA, and Australia and throughout Arabia.

In the 1920s Polish Muslims built a mosque in Brooklyn New York. Detroit saw the beginning of the conversion of many African American Muslims for whom Malcolm X became a spokesperson in the 1960’s. Worldwide 1 in 5 people are Muslim and in the UK approximately 3% of the population is Muslim.
Islamic Societies

In Islamic cultures the decorative arts became highly sophisticated. In such societies there was no essential difference between secular and spiritual life. The first Mosque built was also the home of the Prophet Muhammed (pbuh), likewise the living room of a house can also be used as the family's prayer room where the same prayers are said as within the mosque. Beautifully adorned objects at home and in mosques were intended as a constant remembrance of the words of God and also a reminder of what could be attained in the Hereafter.

‘Do what is beautiful. God loves those who do what is beautiful.’ Quran 2:195

Introducing flowers

Discuss the popularity of flowers. In the 1950s people imagined futuristic homes to be silver metallic and streamlined. However even now, in our technologically developed age we still like to surround ourselves with flowers.
ACTIVITY 1: Introduction

a) In class ask students to create a spider/web diagram of where we see pictures and images of flowers e.g. cups, plates, tablecloths, curtains, wallpaper, card, wrapping paper and plastic bags.

b) For homework ask students to collect images of flowers and leaves (from aforementioned sources), magazines as well as objects from nature e.g. pressed flowers, leaves, bark, seeds, cloves, star anise etc

c) In class draw and cut out squares 15cmx15cm using colour card (eg dark blue and turquoise or dark green and light green). Using a combination of the above materials and glue create a mixed media collage. Suggest the students consider borders/edges, diagonals, parallel lines (horizontal and vertical), repetition, and reflective symmetry (where one half of the image is a mirror reflection of another). Mount all completed pieces to create a tiled wall.

Prayer mat s, India and Pakistan, Victoria and Albert Museum
ACTIVITY 2: Design a floral carpet or prayer rug

a) In class ask students to create a spider/web diagram consider;
What and where are carpets, mats and rugs used and not used?
Why and what size are the carpets?
Why and what are they made of?
What types of images are popular?

b) For homework ask students to collect images of carpets, mats, rugs, bed
spreads, curtains textiles, wall papers with floral, plant patterns and analyse
the designs;
Do they use reflective (where one half of the image is a mirror reflection of
another)
Do they use rotational symmetry (where the object would look the same
after rotation)?
Is there a direction or top to the rug?
Are the arrangements flowering plants the central focus of the design or a
background pattern?
Ask them to research the meaning or symbolism of the fruits, flowers,
plants, seeds and their colours?
Are they associated with a season?
Do they represent a country or are they used in a particular event?
Can they be grown locally in gardens or green houses?
Consider the flexibility of floral designs and how they occupy the space
provided by the object?
Consider whether the flowers, fruits, plants are used as a background or are
they the main subject?
Can you draw buds, flowers, fruits, leaves, stems, seeds, tendrils?

c) In class and or for homework ask students to design a floral inspired prayer rug
or a carpet. Consider design, materials and market.
(i) A Prayer Mat for a Muslim. Consider where they live eg a Scottish Muslim may
need a thick woollen prayer mat whereas a Jamaican Muslim could prefer a silk or
sisal payer mat.
(ii) A square carpet for a Mosque lobby. Consider local designs eg at the Niujie
Mosque in Beijing China, the Great Mosque Shibam Mosque in Yemen,
Kruszyniany Mosque in Poland, the Suleiman Mosque Istanbul, the Great
Ummayad Mosque Damascus Syria, Ulugh Beg Mosque Samarkand Uzbekistan,
Wazir Khan Mosque Lahore Pakistan, the Grande Mosquee de Paris France, Shah
Jahan Mosque in Woking UK, Djenne Mosque in Mali etc.

Notes for C (i)
Muslims all over the world turn their prayer rugs towards Makkah for their 5 daily
prayers. The direction of prayer (Qibla) is always indicated by the use of a
directional point. So that there is always a front section where the forehead rests
in the position of submission. This could be indicated in the design by an arch,
Mihrab or a vase. In mosques the direction of prayer (Qibla) is indicated by the Mihrab, a physical structure. Some prayers rugs are practical and portable and some are for use at home. In times of joy and in times of crisis Muslims will meditate and pray on their prayer rugs as it is considered a protected and sacred space.

Notes for C (ii)

‘To us pattern-designers, Persia has become a Holy Land, for there in the process of time our art was perfected, and thence above all places it spread to cover for a while the world, east and west.’ William Morris.

William Morris described the carpet designed for the Sheikh Lutfullah Mosque as ‘the finest Eastern carpet which I have seen’ and the design is ‘of singular perfection; defensible on all points logically and consistently beautiful’.
Known as The Ardabil Carpet (town in North West Iran), it was made during the reign of Shah Tahmasp for the shrine of the Sufi (the mystical facet of Islam) Saint Sheikh Safi-Al-Din and is one of the largest, finest and historically most important carpets to survive. A copy of the ‘Ardabil’ carpet can be found at 10 Downing Street and even Adolf Hitler owned a copy. It is because of William Morris endeavours we are able to view it at the Jameel Gallery at The Victoria and Albert Museum.
ACTIVITY 3: Flowers on a Coffee Set using an Iznik Palette (dark blue, bright blue/turquoise, red)

a) In class or at home ask students to draw a selection of Tea and or Coffee cups, jugs, mugs and pots. Consider the shape and particularly the surface pattern, material and use. What is it made of and how was it made? Who was it made for and how or where was it used? Why do you think it is a successful or unsuccessful design?

b) Divide the class into groups and on paper as a team design a coffee set eg coffee pot, coffee cups, sugar pot, milk jug etc. Each design team will chose an appropriate plant or flower as inspiration eg Tulip,
Lotus, Jasmine, Rose, Daffodil.
Ask them to research the meaning or symbolism of the flowers and their colours
Are they associated with a season?
Do they represent a country or are they used in a particular event?
Can they be grown locally in gardens or green houses?
Consider the flexibility of floral designs and how they occupy the space provided by the object?
Consider whether the flowers are used as a background or are they the main subject?
Can you draw buds, leaves, stems, tendrils?
Each team will be given a Muslim client which they will need to research on the internet eg Sultan Mehmed II (Turkey), General Zheng He (China), Queen Razia Sultan (India), Queen Victoria’s butler Abdul Karim (India/UK), Noor-un-Nisa Inayat Khan/Nora Baker (Europe/India/US), Dr Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner (Hungary/UK), Abu Ali ibn Sina aka as Avicenna, (Uzbekistan/Iran), Al-Idrisi (Italy/Morocco/Spain) cartographer/geographer.
Consider client, function, material and maintain a design theme through shapes and plant based decoration.

c) In class each student can make 1 item to contribute towards a coffee set.
Research materials, eg brass, earthenware, glass, metal, porcelain, polystyrene, waxed paper etc.

Art option 3 (i)
Tableware could be made from scratch using clay or dough or plasticine or papier mache etc.

Art option 3 (ii)
Students could decorate paper cups using acrylic paints; glass using glass paints and ceramic cups using oven glazes.
Notes on 3

Carafe, coffee, jar, sugar and are words of Arabic origin and there are many legends to the origin of the drink itself. The famous Sufi Saint (the esoteric facet of Islam) from Yemen, Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili is said to have discovered the effects of coffee whilst traveling in Ethiopia and observing the berries effects on birds. Coffee continues to be popular and is associated with many Sufi Orders (the esoteric facet of Islam) who continue to use it to keep alert during their nighttime devotions.

Even though the coffee bean was originally enjoyed in the Yemen the first coffee house appeared in Aleppo, Syria but it was the Ottomans who popularised the culture of the coffee house. The first coffee house in Europe was opened in Venice where a vibrant trade between Egypt and North Africa was well established. However it was Sultan Mehmed IV’s Ottoman ambassador, Soleiman Aghaa, who in 1669 popularised the beverage in Paris and the rest of Europe followed.

Antoine Galland (1646–1715) described the Muslim association with coffee, tea and chocolate: ‘We are indebted to these great [Arab] physicians for introducing coffee to the modern world through their writings, as well as sugar, tea, and chocolate’
Background information

Islamic art weblinks:

V&A Jameel Gallery – further information and interactive resources: [http://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/asia/islamic_gall/](http://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/asia/islamic_gall/)

V&A guide to style in Islamic art: [http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1342_islamic_middle_east/](http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1342_islamic_middle_east/)

V&A ‘Style Guide’ showing influence of Islamic art on British art and design: [http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/british_galleries/bg_styles/Style08d/index.html](http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/british_galleries/bg_styles/Style08d/index.html)

Online international collaborative museum project: ‘Museum with No Frontiers: Discover Islamic art’ – excellent resource: [http://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/asia/islam_gall/](http://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/asia/islam_gall/)

British Museum collection of art from the Islamic Middle East: [http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/world_cultures/middle_east/islamic_middle_east.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/world_cultures/middle_east/islamic_middle_east.aspx)

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York – excellent timeline of art history, including short articles on Islamic art: [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/splash.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/splash.htm)


Plant-based design web links:

Introduction to the Ardabil Carpet in the Jameel Gallery: [http://www.vam.ac.uk/res_cons/conservation/journal/number_49/ardabil_carpet/index.html](http://www.vam.ac.uk/res_cons/conservation/journal/number_49/ardabil_carpet/index.html)


William Morris & Co website: [http://www.william-morris.co.uk/?gclid=CNfTt_z_2ZcCFR8cEAod8mfDDQ](http://www.william-morris.co.uk/?gclid=CNfTt_z_2ZcCFR8cEAod8mfDDQ)


Plant Teachers Notes 1
Contemporary textile design company that incorporates plant-based designs in its work:
www.timorousbeasties.com

Islamic art reading list:


*Six Centuries of Islamic Art in China* Catalogue Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, 2001

