

UNIT 1

Islam and Religious Art

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- ◆ identify key tenets of Islam and important figures and events in early Islamic history; and
- ◆ recognize ways works of art reflect and support religious beliefs and practice.

Introduction

The birth of Islam is marked by the first revelation conveyed to the Prophet Muhammad by God (in Arabic, Allah), which occurred in the seventh century near the city of Mecca on the Arabian Peninsula. Islam emerged in a polytheistic environment; although there were notable Jewish and Christian communities, most people living on the Arabian Peninsula believed in multiple gods. In contrast, the fundamental tenet of Islam was monotheism—the belief in one God alone. What began as a religious movement soon took on a political dimension and Islam spread quickly throughout the Middle and Near East. The fall of the Sasanian empire in Persia and Byzantium’s weakening control of its eastern territories in the seventh century provided fertile ground for this expansion, and within a hundred years of the Prophet’s death the new leaders of the Islamic community (*umma*), the *caliphs*, controlled lands reaching from Spain to present-day Pakistan. The spread of the faith stimulated new architecture and the production of other arts in territories with rich and well-established cultural and artistic traditions. Mosques were built for growing Muslim communities and religious texts about Islamic belief and practice were written and decorated. Works that functioned in or responded to Islamic religious life continued to be produced over the centuries in every region in which Islam is practiced. This unit examines such works and provides an introduction to the beliefs and early history of Islam.

The Five Pillars of Islam

The Five Pillars are the core beliefs and practices of Islam:

1. **Profession of Faith (*shahada*).** The belief that “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God” is central to Islam. This phrase, written in Arabic, is often prominently featured in architecture and a range of objects, including the Qur’an, Islam’s holy book of divine revelations. One becomes a Muslim by reciting this phrase with conviction.
2. **Prayer (*salat*).** Muslims pray facing Mecca five times a day: at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and after dark. Prayer includes a recitation of the opening chapter (*sura*) of the Qur’an, and is sometimes performed on a small rug or mat used expressly for this purpose (see image 24). Muslims can pray individually at any location (fig. 1) or together in a mosque, where a leader in prayer (*imam*) guides the congregation. Men gather in the mosque for the noonday prayer on Friday; women are welcome but not obliged to participate. After the prayer, a sermon focuses on a passage from the Qur’an, followed by prayers by the imam and a discussion of a particular religious topic.
3. **Alms (*zakat*).** In accordance with Islamic law, Muslims donate a fixed portion of their income to community members in need. Many rulers and wealthy Muslims build mosques, drinking fountains, hospitals, schools, and other institutions both as a religious duty and to secure the blessings associated with charity.
4. **Fasting (*sawm*).** During the daylight hours of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, all healthy adult Muslims are required to abstain from food and drink. Through this temporary deprivation, they renew their awareness of and gratitude for everything God has provided in their lives—including the Qur’an, which was first revealed during this month. During Ramadan they share the hunger and thirst of the needy as a reminder of the religious duty to help those less fortunate.

FIG. 1. Portrait of Prince Muhammad Buland Akhtar, known as Achhe Sahib, at Prayer: Folio from an album, 17th century; painter: Hujraj; India; ink and opaque watercolor on paper; 13 $\frac{1}{16}$ x 9 in. (33.2 x 22.9 cm); Rogers Fund, 1925 (25.138.2)

This illustration shows a Mughal prince praying on a mat that features an arch recalling the shape of a prayer niche (*mihrab*), symbolic of the gateway to Paradise. The prince is barefoot as a gesture of humility before God. The simplicity of his surroundings is an indication of piety; the emphasis here is on the prince’s spiritual nature rather than the opulence of his costume or surroundings (which is the case in many royal Mughal portraits; see “The Mughal Court and the Art of Observation,” page 153).

تصویر شاهزاده محمد علی قلی میرزا در حین سجده



علی اوجلی

5. **Pilgrimage (*hajj*).** Every Muslim whose health and finances permit it must make at least one visit to the holy city of Mecca, in present-day Saudi Arabia. The *Ka'ba*, a cubical structure covered in black embroidered hangings, is at the center of the Haram Mosque in Mecca (fig. 2). Muslims believe that it is the house Abraham (Ibrahim in Arabic) built for God, and face in its direction (*qibla*) when they pray. Since the time of the Prophet Muhammad, believers from all over the world have gathered around the *Ka'ba* in Mecca on the eighth and twelfth days of the final month of the Islamic calendar.

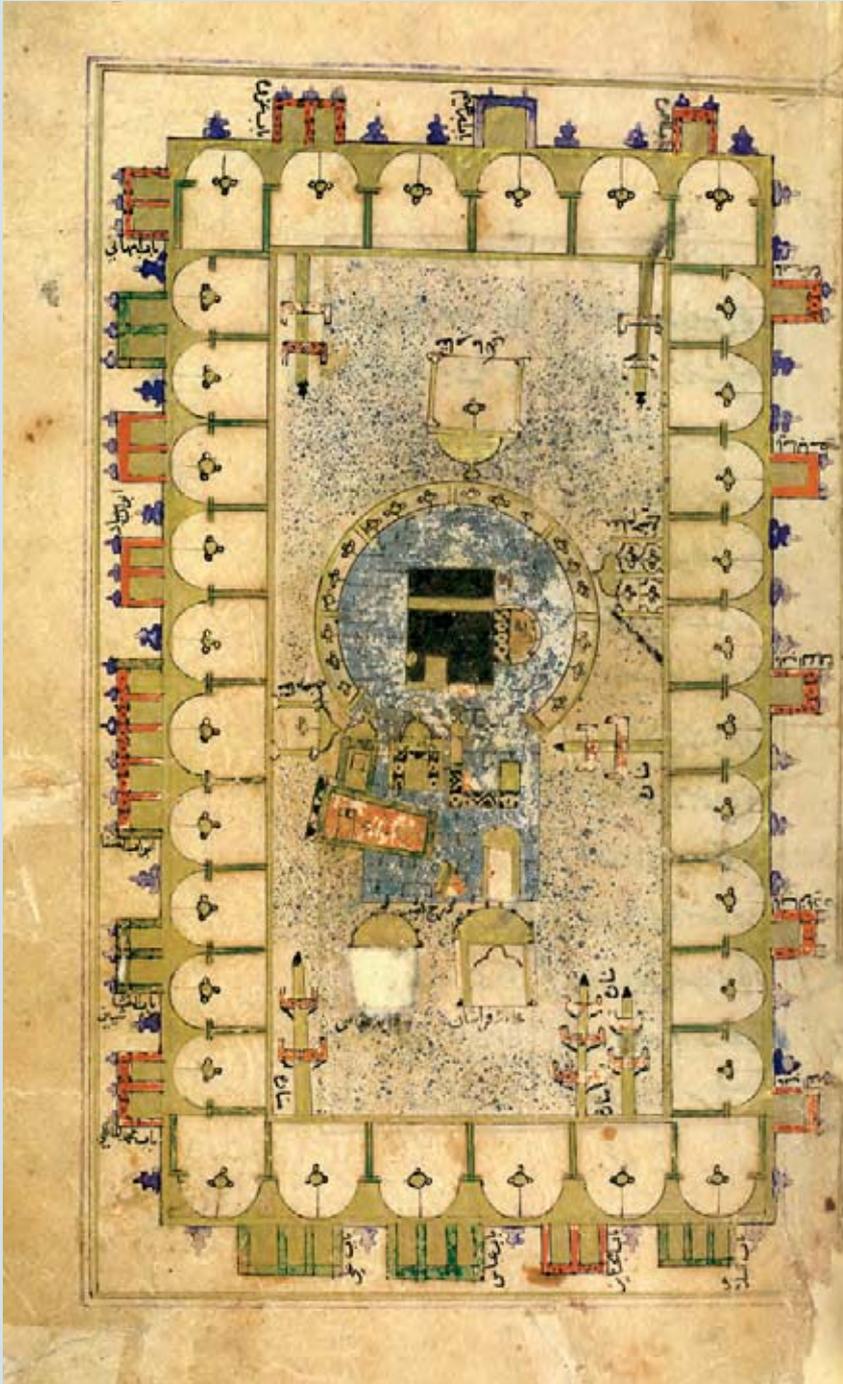


FIG. 2. Folio from the *Futuh al-Haramain* (Description of the Holy Cities), mid-16th century; by Muhi al-Din Lari; Turkey; ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper; 8 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 5 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (21.3 x 13.3 cm); Rogers Fund, 1932 (32.131)

This book illustration provides a schematic view of the innermost enclosure of the Haram Mosque in Mecca. It includes six minarets, the names of the gates, and even shows mosque lamps hanging in the arcades around the *Ka'ba* at the center of the composition. The book is a pilgrimage manual, which describes the holy cities of Mecca and Medina and the rituals that pilgrims are required to perform at each location. The most important of these rituals include walking around the *Ka'ba* seven times, running between the hills of Safa and Marwa to commemorate the story of Ishmael (Isma'il in Arabic) and his mother, and symbolically stoning the devil in the area of Mina.

The Prophet Muhammad and the Origins of Islam

The rise of Islam is intrinsically linked with the Prophet Muhammad, believed by Muslims to be the last in a long line of prophets that includes Moses and Jesus. Because Muhammad was the chosen recipient and messenger of the word of God through the divine revelations, Muslims from all walks of life strive to follow his example. After the holy Qur'an, the sayings of the Prophet (hadith) and descriptions of his way of life (*sunna*) are the most important Muslim texts.

Early Life

Muhammad was born into the most powerful tribe in Mecca, the Quraish, around 570 A.D. The power of the Quraish derived from their role as successful merchants. Several trade routes intersected at Mecca, allowing the Quraish to control trade along the west coast of Arabia, north to Syria, and south to Yemen.

Mecca was home to two widely venerated polytheistic cults whose gods were thought to protect its lucrative trade. After working for several years as a merchant, Muhammad was hired by Khadija, a wealthy widow, to ensure the safe passage of her caravans to Syria. They eventually married.

Divine Revelations

When he was roughly forty, Muhammad began having visions and hearing voices. Searching for clarity, he would sometimes meditate at Mount Hira, near Mecca. On one of these occasions, the Archangel Gabriel (Jibra'il in Arabic) appeared to him and instructed him to recite "in the name of [your] lord." This was the first of many revelations that became the basis of the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam. These early revelations pointed to the existence of a single God, contradicting the polytheistic beliefs of the pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula.

Initially overwhelmed by the significance of what was being revealed to him, Muhammad found unflinching support in his wife and slowly began to attract followers. His strong monotheistic message angered many of the Meccan merchants. They were afraid that trade, which they believed was protected by the pagan gods, would suffer. From that point forward, Muhammad was ostracized in Mecca. For a time, the influence and status of his wife and his uncle, Abu Talib, the chief of the clan, protected Muhammad from persecution. After they died, however, Muhammad's situation in Mecca became dire.

The Hijra

Emigration became the only hope for Muhammad and his followers' survival. In 622, they headed to Medina, another oasis town, where they were promised freedom to practice their religion. The move from Mecca to Medina is known as the *hijra*—the flight—and marks year 1 of the Islamic, or *hijri*, calendar.

Spreading the Message of Islam

In Medina, Muhammad continued to receive divine revelations and built an ever-expanding community around the new faith. The conflict with the Quraish continued, but after several years of violent clashes, Mecca surrendered. Muhammad and his followers soon returned and took over the city, destroying all its pagan idols and spreading their belief in one God.

The Night Journey and Ascension of the Prophet

Accounts of the ascension (*mi'raj*) of Muhammad have captured the imaginations of writers and painters for centuries. One night, while the Prophet was sleeping, the Archangel Gabriel came and led him on a journey. Mounted on the heavenly steed *Buraq*, Muhammad traveled from the Ka'ba in Mecca to the "Farthest Mosque," which Muslims believe to be the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. There he prayed with other prophets such as Moses, Abraham, and Jesus, and ascended to the skies, where he was led by Gabriel through Paradise and Hell, and finally came face to face with God. He then returned to earth to continue spreading the message of Islam. According to Islamic belief, Muhammad was the only person to see Heaven and Hell while still alive.

After the Prophet's Death: Emergence of Shi'i and Sunni Sects of Islam

When Muhammad died in 632, he had not named a successor. One faction, the Shi'a, believed that only individuals with direct lineage to the Prophet could guide the Muslim community righteously. They thought that 'Ali, Muhammad's closest surviving blood male relative, should be their next leader (caliph). The other faction, the Sunnis, believed that the Prophet's successor should be determined by consensus and successively elected three of his most trusted companions, commonly referred to as the Rightly Guided Caliphs (Abu Bakr, 'Umar, and 'Uthman), as leaders of the Muslim community; 'Ali succeeded them as the fourth caliph.

Today the Islamic community remains divided into Sunni and Shi'i branches. Sunnis revere all four caliphs, while Shi'is regard 'Ali as the first spiritual leader. The rift between these two factions has resulted in differences in worship as well as political and religious views. Sunnis are in the majority and occupy most of the Muslim world, while Shi'i populations are concentrated in Iran and Iraq, with sizeable numbers in Bahrain, Lebanon, Kuwait, Turkey, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

Depictions of the Prophet Muhammad

Featured in this unit are several depictions of the Prophet Muhammad. These portrayals, while somewhat rare, are not unheard of as there were (and still are) many different attitudes toward depicting the Prophet, and humans in general, in the Islamic world. These attitudes varied dramatically from region to region and throughout history; the societies that produced the works discussed here are among those that allowed the depiction of the Prophet. Commissioned by Muslims for Muslims, these images appear in biographies of the Prophet and his family, world and local histories, and accounts of Muhammad's celestial journey (*mi'raj*), as well as in literary texts. In each context, they serve a distinct purpose. They illustrate a narrative in biographies and histories, while in literary texts they serve as visual analogues to written praises of the Prophet. An image of the Prophet Muhammad at the beginning of a book endows the volume with the highest form of blessing and sanctity. Thus, illustration of him was a common practice, particularly in the eastern regions of the Islamic world (see also "Frequently Asked Questions," page 9).

The Qur'an

Muslims believe that the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam, was revealed to Muhammad over a period of twenty-three years, starting with the initial revelation at Mount Hira. After the Prophet's death, his successors compiled these divine revelations in a manuscript.

The Qur'an contains prayers, moral guidance, historical narrative, and promises of paradise. It opens with a short prayer called the *Fatiha*, the most widely recited passage, and is divided into 114 chapters (*suras*) organized in descending length. For binding and reading purposes, manuscripts of the Qur'an are often divided into thirty equal parts, called *juz'*.

Every chapter of the Qur'an (except one) begins with the *bismillah*, the collective name for the invocation "In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful." Muslims often repeat this phrase at the start of an event or task—before giving a speech, beginning a meal, or even boarding a bus. The calligraphic *bismillah* is frequently written on both religious and secular objects. (See also "Arabic Script and the Art of Calligraphy," page 55.)

The Qur'an places Muhammad at the end of a long line of prophets that began with Abraham. Although narrative is not central to the Qur'an, it includes the stories of Noah, Moses, and Jesus. It recognizes Jews and Christians as "People of the Book"; as a result, Muslims accept many of the teachings of the Jewish Torah and Christian Bible. Many of the great Islamic empires (like those in Spain, Iran, India, and Turkey) were tolerant of religious minorities.

The Written Word in Islam

Muslims believe that the Qur'an contains the literal words of God, which were spoken in Arabic. Their written form is considered the purest expression of God's intent. Muslims throughout the world share a linguistic bond based on the desire to read the Qur'an in its original language.

Because of the exalted position of the Qur'an in Muslim societies, historically special attention was paid to the production, illumination, decoration, and display of Qur'an manuscripts. Due to its association with the written word of God, calligraphy is considered by Muslims to be the highest art form. Luxuriously embellished Qur'an manuscripts are often placed on specially designed bookstands (*rahla*) and prominently featured in mosques and religious schools (*madrāsas*). (See image 5.)

The Mosque

The English word *mosque* denotes a Muslim house of worship. The word evolved from the Arabic term *masjid*, which means “place of prostration.” During prayer, Muslims briefly kneel and touch their foreheads to the ground as a sign of submission (literally, Islam) to the will of God.

The Origin of the Mosque

The Prophet Muhammad's original house in Medina (in present-day Saudi Arabia) is thought to be the first mosque and probably served as a model for early mosque architecture. It was a mud-brick structure with living quarters on one side of an enclosed rectangular courtyard. Since Muhammad's followers would gather at his home for prayer, the side of the courtyard facing the *qibla*, or the direction of prayer, included a porch covered by palm branches, which offered shelter from the hot desert sun. Most early mosques, as well as the majority of later mosques in Arab lands, follow this general layout (see fig. 4).

Essential Architectural Elements of a Mosque

The essential architectural elements of the mosque include:

- ◆ The *qibla* is the direction Muslims face when praying toward the Ka'ba in Mecca. The *qibla* wall is the wall in a mosque that faces Mecca.
- ◆ The *mihrab* is a niche in the *qibla* wall indicating the direction of Mecca; because of its importance, it is usually the most ornate part of a mosque, highly decorated and often embellished with inscriptions from the Qur'an (see image 4).
- ◆ The *minbar* is a pulpit in the form of a staircase on which the prayer leader (imam) stands when delivering a sermon after Friday prayer. The pulpit is usually situated to the right of the *mihrab* and is often made of elaborately carved wood or stone (fig. 3).
- ◆ A *minaret* is a tall tower attached or adjacent to a mosque. It is designed so the call to prayer, issued from mosques five times a day, can be heard loud and clear throughout a town or city. Alternatively, the call may be made from the roof or entrance, and is now often projected with the aid of microphones and speakers. The minaret is also a visual symbol of the presence of Islam. (See the six minarets of the Sultan Ahmed Mosque, fig. 6.)
- ◆ Most mosque courtyards (*sahn*) contain a public fountain, where believers can perform ablutions, the ritual washing of the hands, feet, and face required before prayer. In the arid lands of Arabia, water is revered as a gift from God, and fountains also have symbolic meaning, alluding to the four rivers of Paradise mentioned in the Qur'an.



FIG. 3. *Minbar* in the Great Mosque of Divrigi, Divrigi, Turkey, 1228–29

The Role of the Mosque

Mosques reflect the size and needs of individual Muslim communities, as their occupants all worship together on Fridays. Historically mosques have been at the center of education and intellectual life.

Inscriptions from the Qur'an adorn the interiors and exteriors of mosques, establishing a strong link between scripture and the place of prayer. Mosque decoration almost never includes human or animal forms, which are seen as potentially idolatrous. Instead, geometric, floral, vegetal, and calligraphic designs adorn mosques, symbolically recalling the promise of Paradise.

Mosques around the World

Mosques throughout the Islamic world use diverse building materials and reflect different regional traditions and styles. Despite variations in size and design, the special place mosques hold in Muslim communities remains universal.

FIG. 4. Mosque of Ahmad Ibn Tulun, Cairo, Egypt, 9th century. View of the courtyard



FIG. 5. Shah Mosque, Isfahan, Iran, 17th century. The *qibla* entrance as seen from inside the courtyard



FIG. 6. Sultan Ahmed Mosque, Istanbul, Turkey, 17th century



1

Muhammad's Call to Prophecy and The First Revelation: Folio from a manuscript of the *Majma' al-Tawarikh* (Compendium of Histories)

About 1425

Present-day Afghanistan, Herat

Opaque watercolor, silver, and gold on paper; page: 16 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 13 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (42.8 x 33.7 cm)

Cora Timken Burnett Collection of Persian Miniatures and Other Persian Art Objects, Bequest of Cora Timken Burnett, 1956 (57.51.37.3)

LINK TO THE THEME OF THIS UNIT

This manuscript page presents a scene from the life of the Prophet Muhammad.

FUNCTION

A *folio* like this would have originally been part of a larger manuscript, in this case the *Compendium of Histories* (a chronicle of religious and historic events), written by Hafiz-i Abru in 1423. Rulers commissioned such manuscripts for distribution to educate their subjects.

DESCRIPTION/VISUAL ANALYSIS

This image depicts Muhammad's first revelation and is framed on the top and bottom by text in Persian that includes quotations from the Qur'an. In the top right of the composition, the Prophet sits upon Mount Hira, his head surrounded by a flaming halo as he looks toward the Archangel Gabriel, who stands below with outstretched arms and returns the Prophet's gaze. The illustration is remarkable for its bright, saturated colors and gold.

CONTEXT

This illustration depicts Gabriel's first appearance to Muhammad. The Archangel commands Muhammad to recite God's word. Muhammad initially hesitated before he spoke God's message.

The text surrounding the image describes this crucial episode in the history of Islam—the first revelation and Muhammad's acceptance of his role as God's messenger:

*Recite: In the Name of thy Lord who created,
created Man of a blood-clot.*

*Recite: And thy Lord is the Most Generous,
who taught by the Pen,
taught Man what he knew not.*

(Qur'an, 96:1–5)

KEY WORDS AND IDEAS

Birth of Islam, Mecca, Prophet Muhammad, Archangel Gabriel, revelation, figural painting

2

The Night Journey of The Prophet Muhammad (*Mi'raj*): Folio from the *Bustan* (Orchard) of Sa'di

About 1525–35

Calligrapher: Sultan Muhammad Nur (about 1472–about 1536)

Penned in present-day Afghanistan, probably Herat

Illustrated in present-day Uzbekistan, probably Bukhara,
 1530–35

Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper; painting: 7½ x 5 in.
 (19 x 12.7 cm)

Purchase, Louis V. Bell Fund and the Vincent Astor Foundation
 Gift, 1974 (1974.294.2)

LINK TO THE THEME OF THIS UNIT

From a sixteenth-century manuscript of a thirteenth-century literary work, this painting depicts one of the most spiritual and revered episodes in Muhammad's life—his ascension to Heaven.

FUNCTION

The *Bustan* (Orchard) of Sa'di, one of the great works of Persian literature, contains moral advice and illustrated anecdotes. Like other folios featuring the Prophet, this image teaches followers about his life. It was once part of a richly illustrated and illuminated (gilded) manuscript of poetic verses commissioned for private use by a ruler or other wealthy patron.

DESCRIPTION/VISUAL ANALYSIS

The Prophet Muhammad is mounted on the celestial steed Buraq at the center of the composition. They ascend to the heavens, guided by the Archangel Gabriel. The illustration clearly distinguishes between the heavenly world of angels and golden clouds, and the earthly world below, where three figures are asleep in a mosque.

CONTEXT

Painted by Muslim artists for a Muslim patron, this image portrays the Prophet unveiled, a practice now deemed blasphemous by conservative religious authorities. Throughout Islamic history, however, artists depicted the Prophet both with and without a face veil.

KEY WORDS AND IDEAS

Birth of Islam, Prophet Muhammad, Buraq (celestial steed), manuscript, *mihrab* (prayer niche), figural painting



2. The Night Journey of The Prophet Muhammad (*Mi'raj*): Folio from the *Bustan* (Orchard) of Sa'di

3

Folio from a Qur'an manuscript

Late 13th–early 14th century

Spain

Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on parchment; 21 $\frac{1}{16}$ x 22 in.

(53.5 x 55.9 cm)

Rogers Fund, 1942 (42.63)

(See poster included in this resource)

LINK TO THE THEME OF THIS UNIT

This large leaf is a page from a manuscript of the Qur'an. The skilled calligraphy and elaborate ornamentation reflect the eminence of the Qur'an in Islam.

FUNCTION

Large, richly illuminated Qur'ans like the one to which this folio originally belonged, celebrated the word of God and raised the written word to an art form. As manuscripts containing the literal word of God, Qur'ans have an indispensable function in both private and public Muslim religious life. They also support oral recitation: cues in the script helped the reciter identify key details such as where to pause and how to vocalize various letter sounds.

DESCRIPTION/VISUAL ANALYSIS

The chapter heading, *Sura al-Zumar* (The Crowds), appears at the top of the page in gold letters. Read from right to left, the title ends in a large circular medallion with an elaborate vegetal pattern that showcases the illuminator's extraordinary talent. Similar smaller medallions indicate the end of each verse, where the reciter is expected to pause. The blue and red dots that appear throughout the page help ensure the proper pronunciation of short vowels, which are not written out in Arabic. Their colorful and precise execution adds a further decorative touch to the page.

CONTEXT

This manuscript was probably produced in Islamic Spain. It features *maghribi* script, which is characterized by cursive letters and swooping sublinear elements (see also

page 61). The use of this script is typical of Spanish and North African Qur'ans, as is the use of parchment, which was unusual in other regions at this late date. The text includes the first, second, and part of the third verses of the *Sura al-Zumar* chapter of the Qur'an, which focuses on the centrality of God and Muhammad's role as the Prophet.

While all Muslims are encouraged to read the Qur'an, correct recitation is a skill acquired through rigorous practice and schooling. In illuminated copies of the Qur'an like this one, elements that may look purely decorative, including the medallions mentioned above, often have practical purposes, such as marking the ends of verses. Because of the exalted place of the Qur'an in Islamic culture, illuminators often exhibited the finest accomplishments of their craft in these manuscripts.

Qur'ans come in many sizes. Very large Qur'ans sometimes serve for public recitation (see, for example, the massive Qur'an of Umar Aqta [1972.279 and 18.17.1]). Others are very small and could be carried on one's person (fig. 7).



FIG. 7. Folio from a Qur'an manuscript, 9th century; probably Egypt or Iraq; ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on parchment; 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 2 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. (3.8 x 7.3 cm); Rogers Fund, 1962 (62.152.2)

The small size of this Qur'an would have allowed the owner to carry it on his or her person, making it ideal for travel. A personal Qur'an like this could also have functioned as a *talisman*, exemplifying the belief that the word of God brings blessings and protection to the believer through its mere presence.

KEY WORDS AND IDEAS

Spread of Islam, Qur'an, Arabic, calligraphy (*maghribi*), recitation

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

قَرِئَ الْكِتَابِ مِنَ اللَّهِ الْعَزِيزِ الْحَكِيمِ

إِنَّا أَنْزَلْنَاهُ بِالْحَقِّ وَالْحَقُّ وَرَأْتِ

اللَّهُ مُخْلِصًا لَهُ الدِّينَ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَذِيرٌ

الْعَالِمُ ۗ وَالَّذِينَ تَأْتِيهِمْ آيَاتُ

مَنْعَبَدَ مِنْهُ إِلَّا لِيُفَرِّقُوا إِلَى اللَّهِ زُلْفَىٰ

4

Mihrab

From a religious school dated A.H. 755 / A.D. 1354–55

Iran, Isfahan

Mosaic of polychrome-glazed cut tiles on stonepaste body, set into mortar; 135 $\frac{1}{16}$ x 113 $\frac{1}{16}$ in. (343.1 x 288.7 cm),

Wt. 4,500 lbs. (2041.2 kg)

Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1939 (39.20)

LINK TO THE THEME OF THIS UNIT

Mihrabs, like this example from Iran, are central architectural features of mosques and many Islamic religious schools all over the world.

FUNCTION

A *mihrab* is a niche in the wall of a mosque or religious school (*madrasa*) that indicates the direction of Mecca (*qibla*), which Muslims face when praying. It is the architectural and symbolic focal point of religious buildings.

DESCRIPTION/VISUAL ANALYSIS

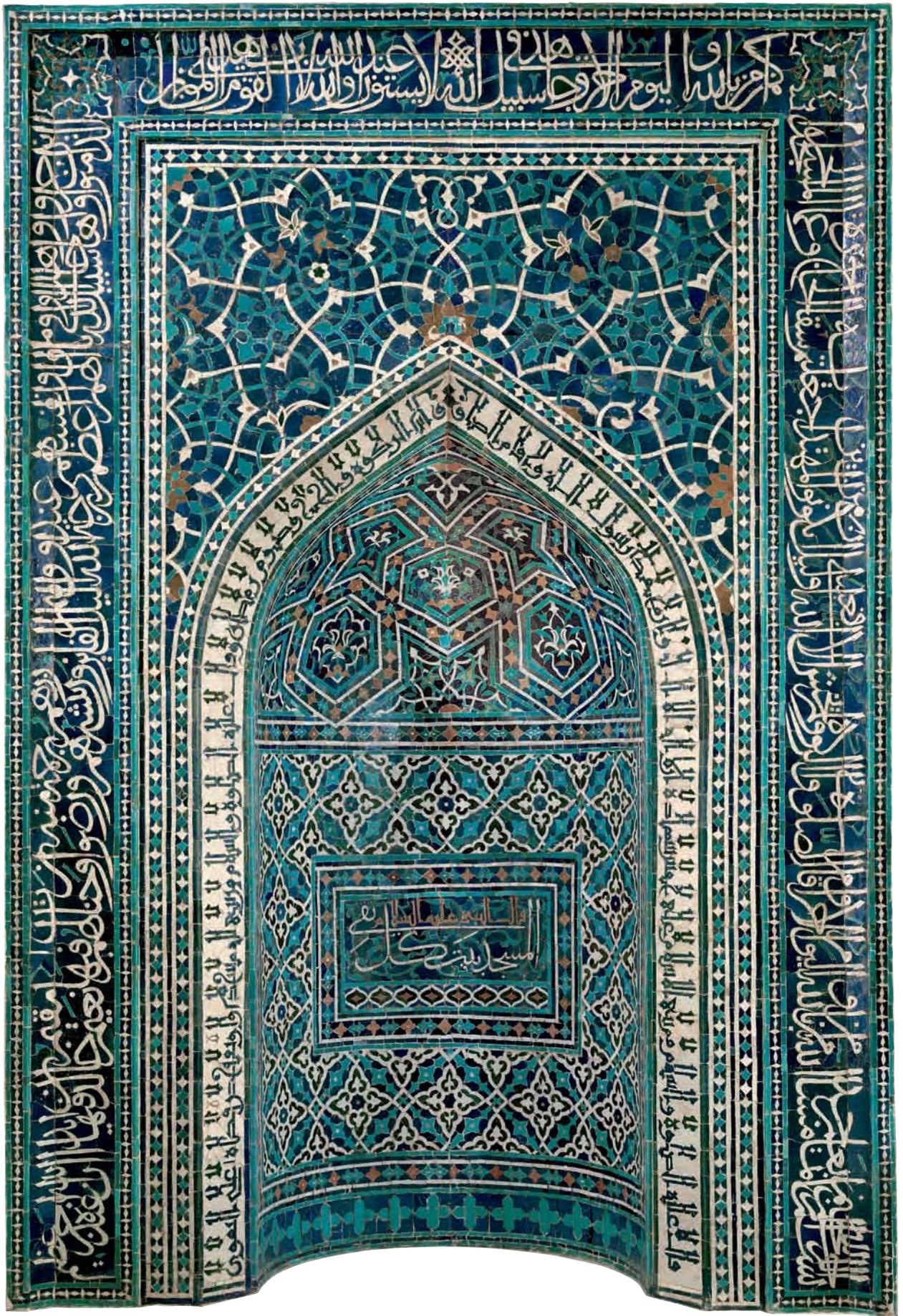
This *mihrab* is decorated with inscriptions on a background of cobalt blue, turquoise, golden yellow, white, and dark green tile mosaic. The outermost rectangular band contains cursive verses from the Qur'an (9:14–22) describing God as all-knowing and omnipresent. The frame around the niche is decorated with arabesque designs outlined in blue and interspersed with floral blossoms. An inscription from the hadith (Sayings of the Prophet), written in angular *kufic* script (see also page 58) along the edge of the pointed arch, describes the Five Pillars of Islam. At the center of the *mihrab*, directly facing the worshippers, an inscription reads: "The Prophet, may peace be upon him, said, 'the mosque is the abode of the pious.'"

CONTEXT

Mosques were not the only religious buildings that had prayer niches—this one comes from a fourteenth-century religious school (*Madrasa Imami*) in Isfahan, in present-day Iran. Students would have performed their daily prayers here, but would also have gone to the communal mosque on Fridays. This *mihrab* shows that lavish ornamentation was encouraged rather than shunned, even in religious settings.

KEY WORDS AND IDEAS

Five Pillars of Islam, Arabic, calligraphy (*kufic*, *thuluth*, and *muhaqqaq* scripts), Mecca, Qur'an, *madrasa* (religious school), Iran, tilework



4. Mihrab

5

Qur'an stand (*rahla*)

Dated A.H. 761 / A.D. 1360

Maker: Hasan ibn Sulaiman Isfahani

Iran

Teak; carved, painted, and inlaid;

45 x 50 x 16½ in. (114.3 x 127 x 41.9 cm)

Rogers Fund, 1910 (10.218)

LINK TO THE THEME OF THIS UNIT/FUNCTION

Lavishly decorated stands (*rahlās*) were designed to hold large copies of the Qur'an. According to its inscriptions, this one was used in a religious school (*madrāsa*) in a town near Isfahan, in present-day Iran.

DESCRIPTION/VISUAL ANALYSIS

This stand is made of two interlocking wood panels decorated with carved inscriptions and floral, vegetal, and geometric motifs. The upper square panels bear the word God ("Allah") repeated in four quadrants over a

background of carved spiral arabesques. The lower rectangular sections are deeply carved in several layers; at the center of a representation of a prayer niche (*mihrab*) stands a cypress tree. The frame of the niche is decorated with calligraphy and spiraling arabesques, while naturalistic flowers cover the surface outside this border. The inscriptions include the name of the carver, Hasan ibn Sulaiman of Isfahan, and evoke the might of God and the holiness of Muhammad and the twelve Shi'i imams, his successors.

CONTEXT

Inscriptions from religious texts frequently decorate Qur'an stands. Those using this stand would have been highly educated and thus able to read and understand the calligraphy. However, in Islam, the words of God are a blessing to believers, even when they cannot be read.

KEY WORDS AND IDEAS

Qur'an, imam (prayer leader), *madrāsa* (religious school), calligraphy (*thuluth*, *kufic*, and *naskh* scripts), vegetal and floral ornament, wood



5. Qur'an stand (*rahla*)

6

Mosque lamp

About 1329–35

Maker: ‘Ali ibn Muhammad al-Barmaki

Egypt

Glass, colorless with brown tinge; blown, blown applied foot, enameled and gilded; H. 14 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. (35.9 cm), Max. Diam. 10 $\frac{1}{6}$ in. (25.6 cm)

Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.991)

LINK TO THE THEME OF THIS UNIT

Mosque lamps like this one symbolize God’s presence. In the *Ayat al-Nur* (The Light Verse), one of the most quoted passages from the Qur’an, God is compared to light:

*God is the Light of the heavens and the earth;
The likeness of His Light is as a niche
wherein is a lamp
(the lamp in a glass,
the glass as it were a glittering star)
kindled from a Blessed Tree,
an olive that is neither of the East nor of the West
whose oil well-nigh would shine, even if no fire touched it;
Light upon Light
(God guides to His Light whom He Will.)
(Sura al-Nur, 24:35)*

FUNCTION

Because the first and last daily prayers are held before dawn and after sunset, lamps are necessary for illumination in mosques and other religious buildings. In earlier periods, lamps such as this were used for both secular and religious purposes, but by the fourteenth century they were made almost exclusively for mosques, mausoleums, and religious schools (*madrasas*). Often a wealthy official would donate lamps to a mosque or shrine as an expression of charity and piety.

DESCRIPTION/VISUAL ANALYSIS

This mosque lamp is made of blown glass shaped into a semi-spherical body with a low foot and wide opening, and enameled and gilded. The shape, intricate enameled decoration, and detailed inscriptions are typical of mosque lamps produced during the Mamluk sultanate (1250–1517) in Egypt and Syria. (See image 45.)

The calligraphic decoration is divided into three bands: one on the flare, one on the body, and a third on the underside. The name of the patron who commissioned the lamp is inscribed in the lower portion. When lit, the flickering flame illuminated areas without enamel paint, such as the text in the mid-section. The lamp is also decorated with bands of floral ornament.

CONTEXT

The decoration on this lamp indicates the status of its patron. The cup design featured prominently near the mouth is the blazon (similar to a coat of arms) of the sultan’s cupbearer (*jashanqir*), a position in the Mamluk court. During the Mamluk sultanate, high court officials usually had blazons that indicated their roles in the hierarchy and ceremonies of the court. The ceremonial cupbearer who commissioned this lamp is identified by an inscription as Saif al-Din Qawsun; the lamp may have been created for his mosque or mausoleum in Cairo.

KEY WORDS AND IDEAS

Egypt, Mamluk dynasty, patronage, amir (commander), mosque, blown glass



6. Mosque lamp

Lesson Plan: Unit 1 Islam and Religious Art

FEATURED WORK OF ART

Muhammad's Call to Prophecy and The First Revelation: Folio from a manuscript of the *Majma' al-Tawarikh* (Compendium of Histories) (image 1)

About 1425

Present-day Afghanistan

Opaque watercolor, silver, and gold on paper;

page: 16 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 13 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (42.8 x 33.7 cm)

Cora Timken Burnett Collection of Persian Miniatures and Other Persian Art Objects, Bequest of Cora Timken Burnett, 1956 (57.51.37.3)

SUBJECT AREAS: English Language Arts, Visual Arts, and World History

GRADES: High School

TOPIC/THEME: Art and Belief

GOALS

Students will be able to:

- ◆ identify important figures and events in early Islamic history;
- ◆ recognize ways works of art reflect and support religious beliefs and practices; and
- ◆ use visual evidence to support inferences.

NATIONAL LEARNING STANDARDS

English Language Arts

- ◆ NL-ENG.K-12.9 Multicultural Understanding
- ◆ NL-ENG.K-12.10 Applying Non-English Perspectives

Visual Arts

- ◆ NA-VA.K-12.4 Understanding the Visual Arts in Relation to History and Cultures
- ◆ NA-VA.K-12.6 Making Connections Between Visual Arts and Other Disciplines

World History

- ◆ NSS-WH.5-12.5 Era 5: Intensified Hemispheric Interactions, 1000–1500 C.E.

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

English Language Arts

- ◆ SL.CCR.1 Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects

- ◆ R.CCR.4 Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical,

connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

- ◆ R.CCR.7 Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words

ACTIVITY SETTING: Classroom

MATERIALS: Pencil and paper, computer with Internet access and speakers, projected images or printouts of image 1 and figs. 8, 9

QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING

- ◆ Look closely at the clothing, pose, facial expression, and attributes of each figure in image 1. What might they suggest about each figure? (Note: Attitudes toward figural arts in the Islamic world varied according to time and place, ranging from totally aniconic—no images of people or animals—to entirely accepting of figural imagery in secular settings. The Qur'an does not prohibit the depiction of figures, but the Sayings of the Prophet (hadith) discusses the subject several times. The objections expressed there largely focus on the exclusive role of God as creator.)
- ◆ What appears to be happening? What do you see that makes you say that?
- ◆ According to Muslim belief the Prophet Muhammad (seated) received his first revelation when the Archangel Gabriel (left) appeared and instructed him to recite God's message. What do you think this artist hoped to convey about the event?
- ◆ The text surrounding the image describes this crucial episode in the history of Islam—the first revelation and Muhammad's acceptance of his role as God's messenger. Listen to an audio recording of the section of the Qur'an corresponding to the first revelation (see link in **RESOURCES**). What do you notice about the sound of the words? How does this support or challenge your initial impressions of the scene?
- ◆ Read an excerpt from the revelation below (translated from Arabic). What do these words mean to you?

Recite: In the Name of thy Lord who created, created Man of a blood-clot.

Recite: And thy Lord is the Most Generous, who taught by the Pen, taught Man what he knew not.

(Qur'an, 96:1–5)

ACTIVITY

SUBJECT AREAS: Visual Arts and World History

DURATION: Approximately 60 minutes

Compare and contrast the ways in which works of art reflecting Christian and Muslim beliefs (figs. 8, 9; image 1) present a pivotal spiritual moment. Collect information about the figures (pose, facial expression, clothing and accessories), setting, and artistic choices (color, composition, and selection and application of materials) in each work. Identify similarities and differences between the works using the data you collected as an aid. Discuss how the various representations of these important moments support the religious beliefs and practices of each faith.



FIG. 8. Luca Giordano (Italian, 1634–1705), *The Annunciation*, 1672; oil on canvas; 34 x 31½ in. (86.4 x 80 cm); The Friedsam Collection, Bequest of Michael Friedsam, 1931 (1973.311.2)



FIG. 9. Joos van Cleve (Netherlandish, about 1485–1540/41), *The Annunciation*, about 1525; oil on wood; 34 x 31½ in. (86.4 x 80 cm); The Friedsam Collection, Bequest of Michael Friedsam, 1931 (32.100.60)

RESOURCES

Sorabella, Jean. “The Birth and Infancy of Christ in Italian Painting.” In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/birt/hd_birt.htm (June 2008).

“Surah al ‘Alaq.” *Audio Islam*. January 31, 2009. http://www.audioislam.com/audio/quran/recitation/al-afaasee/surah_al_alaq.mp3.

Yalman, Suzan. Based on original work by Linda Komaroff. “The Birth of Islam.” In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/isla/hd_isla.htm (October 2001).

OBJECTS IN THE MUSEUM’S COLLECTION RELATED TO THIS LESSON

Fig. 8. Luca Giordano (Italian, 1634–1705), *The Annunciation*, 1672; oil on canvas; 34 x 31½ in. (86.4 x 80 cm); The Friedsam Collection, Bequest of Michael Friedsam, 1931 (1973.311.2)

Fig. 9. Joos van Cleve (Netherlandish, about 1485–1540/41), *The Annunciation*, about 1525; oil on wood; 34 x 31½ in. (86.4 x 80 cm); The Friedsam Collection, Bequest of Michael Friedsam, 1931 (32.100.60)

Image 2. The Night Journey of The Prophet Muhammad (*Mi‘raj*): Folio from the *Bustan* (Orchard) of Sa‘di, about 1525–35. Calligrapher: Sultan Muhammad Nur (about 1472–about 1536). Penned in present-day Afghanistan, probably Herat Illustrated in present-day Uzbekistan, probably Bukhara, 1530–35; ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper; painting: 7½ x 5 in. (19 x 12.7 cm); Purchase, Louis V. Bell Fund and The Vincent Astor Foundation Gift, 1974 (1974.294.2)

Image 3. Folio from a Qur’an manuscript, 13th–14th century; Spain; ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on parchment; 21¼ x 22 in. (53.5 x 55.9 cm); Rogers Fund, 1942 (42.63)

Author: Adapted from a lesson by classroom teacher Jody Madell
Date: 2012

Unit 1 Suggested Readings and Resources

THE FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM

Armstrong, Karen. *Islam: A Short History*. New York: Modern Library, 2002.

HIGH SCHOOL

Bloom, Jonathan, and Sheila Blair. *Islam: A Thousand Years of Faith and Power*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.

MIDDLE SCHOOL; HIGH SCHOOL

Handbook to the PBS video *Islam: Empire of Faith*. See especially chapter 3, “Sources of Faith.”

Islam: Empire of Faith. DVD. 163 min. Arlington, Va.: PBS Home Video, 2000.

A series of three programs that trace the rise of early Islamic civilization through scholarly interviews, evocative reenactments, and an exposition of Islamic art, artifacts, and architecture. See also the companion website, <http://www.pbs.org/empires/islam>, and handbook, *Islam: A Thousand Years of Faith and Power*, above.

Esposito, John L. *What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam*. 2d ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

HIGH SCHOOL

An excellent reference for students and educators, presented in question-and-answer format.

Khan, Hena, and Julie Paschkis. *Night of the Moon: A Muslim Holiday Story*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2008.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD AND HIS LIFE

Armstrong, Karen. *Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time*. Eminent Lives. New York: Atlas Books/HarperCollins, 2006.

HIGH SCHOOL

Muhammad: Legacy of a Prophet. Film website. Menlo Park, Calif.: Kikim Media, 2002.

See also <http://www.pbs.org/muhammad/index.shtml>, a highly informative online companion to the film *Muhammad: Legacy of a Prophet*.

Yalman, Suzan. Based on original work by Linda Komaroff. “The Birth of Islam.” In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/isla/hd_isla.htm (October 2001).

HIGH SCHOOL

THE MOSQUE

Grazda, Edward, and Jerrilyn D. Dodds. *New York Masjid: The Mosques of New York City*. New York: powerHouse Books, 2002.

HIGH SCHOOL

An exploration of the mosques of New York with beautiful black-and-white photos.

Macaulay, David. *Mosque*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL; MIDDLE SCHOOL

An in-depth look at the process of building a mosque in sixteenth-century Istanbul.

UNIT 1 SOURCES

Akbarnia, Ladan, and Francesca Leoni. *Light of the Sufis: The Mystical Arts of Islam*. Exhibition catalogue. Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2010.

Arberry, Arthur J., trans. *The Koran*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Bloom, Jonathan, and Sheila Blair. *Islam: A Thousand Years of Faith and Power*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.

———. *Islamic Arts*. London: Phaidon Press, 1997.

Carboni, Stefano, and David Whitehouse. *Glass of the Sultans*. Exhibition catalogue. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001.

Chebel, Malek, and Laziz Hamani. *Symbols of Islam*. Paris: Assouline, 1997.

Ernst, Carl W. *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003.

Ettinghausen, Richard, Oleg Grabar, and Marilyn Jenkins-Madina. *Islamic Art and Architecture 650–1250*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.

Flood, Finbarr B. “Faith, Religion, and the Material Culture of Early Islam.” In *Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition, 7th–9th Century*, edited by Helen C. Evans with Brandie Ratliff, pp. 244–58. Exhibition catalogue. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2012.

Schimmel, Annemarie. *And Muhammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985.

———. *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975.