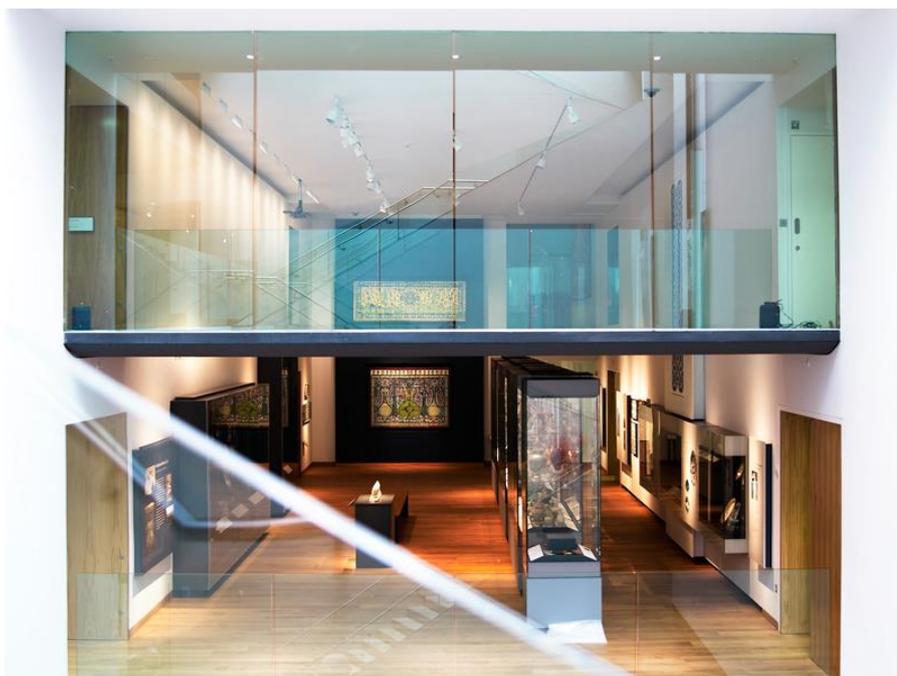


Engaging KS2 audiences with Islamic Art and Material Culture at the Ashmolean – Clare Coleman, Education Officer: Early Years to Key Stage 2

Of all the Oxford University Museums, the Ashmolean has the strongest collection of Islamic Art and Material Culture housed mainly in the Islamic Middle East Gallery and the Mughal India Galleries. So, when the new Primary Curriculum was unveiled in 2014 I decided to launch a new Take One project using an object from our collection. Using the Take One approach, classes could choose a variety of themes to focus on, including Baghdad AD900 and Islamic Art and Design.

<http://www.ashmolean.org/education/resources/resources2011/TakeOne48TilesTeachersNotes.pdf>

The Islamic Middle East Gallery is a stunning double height gallery in the heart of the museum on the first floor. However the layout of the gallery excluded some strong candidates for a Take One object as the space surrounding the objects would make it hard to gather with a whole class of children.



The mosque lamp on the left was commissioned by Sultan Muhammad ibn Qala'un, ruler of Egypt and Syria from about 1294 to 1340 AD. His name appears around the body of the lamp. The doors on the right with intricate geometric designs are from Egypt during the Mamluk sultanate (1250–1517). Both objects could have been strong contenders to act as a gateway object but the gallery layout ruled them out.



So, the set of 48 tiles from Damascus were chosen partly because of the ease of viewing them with a class of up to 32 children. The tiles were also a good choice as most children will be familiar with ceramic tiles and will be able to make connections with their own life and culture and the life and culture of people in 17th century Syria.

Planning the session was quite straightforward. I followed my usual strategy in designing any session by considering the key elements that build towards making a successful gallery visit. Children need a set of clear learning outcomes that are supported by activities that encourage them to engage with objects through enquiry.

In essence, they need to look, look closer, get hands on and make connections, make choices and collect information and they need to get the chance to make their own responses based on what they have discovered.

Activities included in the workshop started with an 'I Spy' game to encourage close looking followed by a question and answer on the use of tiles. Children then completed large foam board jigsaws of the tiles enabling them to look closer at the shapes, patterns and design of the tiles. Following on from this the children were introduced to the idea that all forms of art are considered equal – including calligraphy and learnt about the key elements of Islamic Art and Design. They took part in gallery hunts, object handling and tessellation challenges before selecting a group of objects they found particularly interesting and collecting information about these objects. Finally, using these objects as their focus, they all took part in drawing activities to create their own designs inspired by their chosen objects. In the early workshops these designs were then transferred onto EVA foam which could be used back at school to create individual or group repeated pattern prints on textile or other materials. In later workshops children also had the opportunity to transform their initial design into kaleidoscopic, more intense repeated designs using the iPad app Trigonoscope.

In addition to the KS2 sessions, I was approached by a school who wanted a challenging project for a group of year 8 pupils. They wanted to focus on both Lawrence of Arabia and a pair of doors that had been installed in his pool house in Dorset and the set of 48 tiles from Damascus. The project proved to be a great success and they are considering repeating the project next year.

The tile project was also picked up by KS1 groups but in the main they were looking primarily at shape and pattern.

The future

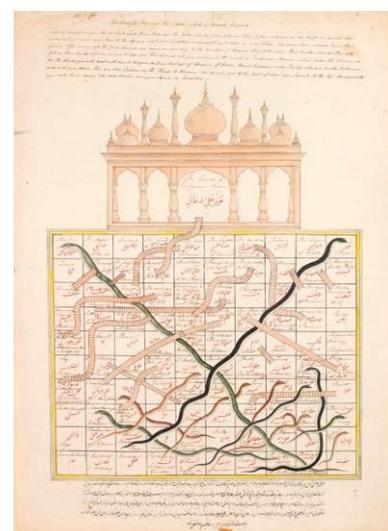
For some time I had been considering designing a session that focussed more closely on Baghdad AD900 possibly looking at links with some objects from our Chinese collection and looking at paper making. When I created the Take One set of tiles project, we had on display one of the earliest datable examples of calligraphy, a double page from a Qur'an written in Kufic script dating from AD870. It shows verses 55 and 57 of Surat Al'Imran. However, relying on any textile or work on paper staying on display seemed unwise.



Also, colleagues at The Museum of the History of Science, part of Oxford University's GLAM group, recently launched a 'House of Wisdom' session for KS2. For this reason I decided that I would design a new 'Islamic Art and Design' session. The hope is that some schools, particularly those with a two form entry, might choose to visit both museums for complementary sessions.

As well as the new Islamic Art and Design session and the Take One sessions, I have recently designed a KS1 session focussing on animals in Indian Art. A key object that features in the session is a beautiful snakes and ladders board. The board is for a Sufi Muslim version of the game, known as gyan chaupar in India. The board starts in the bottom left hand corner with non-existence and birth and then travels upward through a variety of pitfalls - the snakes - and positives - the ladders towards the Throne of God housed in a Mughal mosque.

Even the youngest children in KS1 recognised the game board making it an ideal gateway object to another time and culture. I am considering using this object as a future Take One object as I can see great potential for a variety of lines of enquiry. As stated before, since this is a work on paper it might need to be taken off display for conservation reasons.



However, the Mughal India Gallery houses a number of other objects which would also be good gateway objects. For example, there is a fabulous model of one of the great Indo-Islamic monuments of Delhi, the Qutub Minar. Constructin of this towering minaret, 72.5 metres high, began in 1193. It was commissioned by Qutb-ud-din Aibak, the first Muslim Sultan to rule at Delhi, and completed by Firuz Shah Tughluq (1351-88).

As techniques for 3D photography and printing continue to improve and prices continue to fall, this object could be rendered into a 3D model in sections. This would be a superb handling object not only for children but for all audiences we engage with – particularly our visually impaired visitors.

I have been committed to engaging primary school groups with Islamic Art and Material Culture since day one in post. The Take One set of tiles project grew out of bespoke sessions I had been running since 2011 at the Ashmolean and was spurred on by the changes in the national curriculum. I will continue to explore new ways of engaging all children with objects from our collections to promote better knowledge and understanding of the richness of the culture for those with little prior knowledge and to promote a sense of worth for members of our local Muslim communities.

