

Power and Protection

Islamic Art and the Supernatural

20 October 2016 - 15 January 2017



The desire to see into the future and to draw on hidden forces for protection and guidance are universal human impulses. In the Islamic world, these inclinations could be seen as clashing with Islam's central message - total surrender to the will of God. Yet history reveals that Muslim societies have held a broad spectrum of attitudes towards engaging with the supernatural, ranging from casual acceptance to utter condemnation. This exhibition explores the ways in which Muslims of all backgrounds have engaged with forces beyond nature and above human control. Stretching from Morocco to China and from the 12th century to the present, the books, tools, vessels, garments and jewellery on display open a window onto divinatory and talismanic arts both as intellectual disciplines and sources of artistic inspiration. By reflecting daily worries and hopes, these objects reveal how the human quest for protection and good luck often overlapped with the belief in God's all-powerfulness.

Finial in the Shape of the 'Hand of Fatima'
Possibly Hyderabad (India), late 18th–early 19th century
Gold on a lac core, rubies, emeralds, diamonds, and pearls
Nasser D. Khalili Collection, London (JLY1923)
© Nour Foundation. Courtesy of the Khalili Family Trust

This is a charging exhibition but FREE for booked UK school groups and for under 12s. To book a group visit please contact the Education Department:
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Exploring the exhibition

Astrology

Astrology is known in Arabic as 'the science of the judgement of the stars' (*'ilm ahkam al-nujum*) and is closely related to astronomy. The data produced by astronomical instruments is interpreted by astrologers to reveal future events or the character and personalities of individuals. In the past, many rulers employed astrologers as key members of their administration. Their expertise went into producing personal horoscopes and scholarly treatises in support of astrology. At the other end of the social spectrum, fortune-tellers, and sometimes charlatans, offered consultations in squares and market places which were repeatedly criticised by the authorities. Astrology continued to be contentious and there were always theologians who condemned it.



Coffee Set with Astrological Decoration, signed Muhammad Baqir Iran, early 19th century, gold, enamelled
Accepted by HM Government in lieu of Inheritance Tax on the Estate of Basil W. Robinson and allocated to the Ashmolean Museum, 2009.
Ashmolean Museum (EA2009.2-4)



Miniature Qur'an, Iran, 1307 AH / 1889-90, woodblock print
Presented by Mrs A. Johnson, 1992. Ashmolean Museum (EA1992.42)

© Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

The Power of the Word

In some Islamic traditions the universe is thought of as an immense book waiting to be read and deciphered. According to this view, words and letters not only name things, but also capture their essence. They are the keys to the mysteries of creation. Intimate knowledge of this cosmic language potentially grants control of both objects and events.

The idea that words have such power lies at the basis of the *'ilm al-huruf* or divination by letters. This esoteric science explores the beneficial properties of the letters from sacred texts. This gallery looks at the protective and healing uses of Qur'anic words and verses, and other sacred phrases such as the Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God (*al-asma' al-husna*).



Body Armour (*chahar-aine*), signed Luft 'Ali, Iran, 1150 AH / 1737-8, steel, inlaid with gold, purchased, 1997. Ashmolean Museum (EA1997.176)

© Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

Words as Protection

According to a popular legend, the Prophet Muhammad received the Names of God from the Angel Gabriel as a symbolic coat of armour to protect him during one of his campaigns. The idea that sacred words could provide a defence against harm is illustrated by their extensive use on military equipment - from undergarments and banners to weapons and armour.

The Qur'an is once again the principal source of potent words, and excerpts from specific chapters feature on objects used in warfare. Individual letters from Qur'anic words (or their numeric equivalents) are also laid out in squares or roundels to strengthen the talismanic power of these items.

Words as Medicine

The relationship between religion and popular medicine in Islam is extremely close. As one scholar put it, 'it is impossible to separate them without mutilating both.' Religious texts and spiritual practices have complemented conventional medicine from the beginnings of Islam. Pious invocations and prayers are essential ingredients of the remedies used in prophetic medicine (*al-tibb al-nabawi*). This tradition draws on the prophet's own experience of health, medication and hygiene, combining it with established popular cures.



Magico-Medicinal Bowl, Iran, 1066 AH / 1655, brass, engraved and incised
Presented by Mrs Johnson, 1992. Ashmolean Museum (EA1992.51)

© Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford



Calligram, signed Mustafa Edirnavi, Turkey, 1215 AH / 1800-1
Ink and gold on cream and light blue paper, mounted on board
Purchased with the assistance of Richard de Unger and Adeela Qureshi and
the Patrons of the Ashmolean, 2015. Ashmolean Museum (EA2015.12)

© Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

Between Text and Image

The written word has always had a central role in Islamic art. God's prime manifestation is through his Word as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad and recorded in the Qur'an. This is why calligraphy became such a revered art form, as expressive as figurative art which was not always as contentious as is commonly believed.

Beautiful writing is a compelling way of conjuring images too. Calligrams (images made of words) and verbal portraits of Muhammad (*hilya*) are good examples of the evocative power of calligraphy. Whatever their form, the works exhibited are a reminder that in Islam art is often inseparable from religious expression.

Amulets and Talismans

These objects are created to bring luck and protection via supernatural means. Some may be companions into battle or on long journeys. Others hang in public spaces or in private homes to safeguard them. Most are personal items that remain close to the body - hung from the neck, hidden in pockets or sewn into garments. Some stones and metals are believed to have inherent properties and so certain materials are selected for specific purposes - such as cornelian to calm the heart, or jade to counteract poisons. Even more important are the different texts and symbols inscribed onto them, which appeal to supernatural forces. Since God and the Qur'an are the ultimate sources of protection and guidance, Qur'anic verses, prayers and litanies are the most commonly used texts. As such, amulets and talismans could be seen as part of everyday piety.



Amulet, India, late 17th-early 18th century
Cornelian, inscribed and jade inlaid with gold and inset with emeralds and
rubies. Presented by J. B. Elliott, 1859. Ashmolean Museum (EA2009.5)

© Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

Sacred Symbols

Islamic amulets and talismans employ a rich vocabulary of images, often depicting attributes of revered individuals. Stylised versions of Muhammad's personal effects such as his cloak and his sandals, and physical marks such as the mole on his back, appear frequently. These representations act as intermediaries between the physical and spiritual realms, echoing the role of the Prophet himself as key intercessor, and offering the same blessing and shelter he provided in life.

Islamic objects at the Ashmolean

- Most of the Islamic objects are on display in Gallery 31: The Islamic Middle East Gallery.
- The gallery does not contain many objects that directly link to Islam as a religion, but it does help us to understand more about Islamic culture.
- It is often thought that Islamic art does not contain representations of humans and animals. However, some objects on display incorporate images because they were not produced as religious pieces.

Exploring Art & Design themes

- Explore different types of calligraphy in the exhibition. There are different styles of script, often arranged in various patterns and colours. Calligraphy can be found painted on glass, carved into stonework, cut into metal, fired into pottery and written into books.
- Explore decorated tile work. This is found on everything from mosques to public drinking fountains. The geometric patterns are often complex and highly coloured. The same patterns can be used in relief carving on building. Try to copy some of the geometric patterns from examples in the gallery.
- Arabesque is a form of artistic decoration consisting of 'surface decorations based on rhythmic linear patterns of scrolling and interlacing foliage, tendrils' or plain lines. It can be found on ceramics, textiles, tiles and glass. Study two very different examples.

Other galleries containing Islamic objects

Gallery 5: Textiles, Islamic textiles

Gallery 7: Money, Islamic coins

Gallery 6: Reading and Writing

Gallery 30: Mediterranean World, astrolabe and items relating to Jerusalem as pilgrimage centre

Gallery 28: Asian Crossroads, pilgrimage items

Gallery 33: Mughal India, inc changing displays of paintings that highlight wealth of Mughal court

Gallery 34: Medieval Cyprus, crusader coins



The 'Seal of Solomon' (*muhr sulayman*) and the 'Seal of Prophethood' (*muhr al-nubuwwa*). From a Collection of Qur'anic Passages, Prayers, and Diagrams, Turkey, mid-18th century. Ink, colours, and gold on paper; leather flap binding with stamped, gilt and lacquered decoration. Nasser D. Khalili Collection, London (MSS158, fols 124b–125a)

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