

Syracuse University
Department of Religion
Fall 2009

REL 367 *Islamic Arts and Aesthetics*



Professor: Tazim R. Kassam
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Class Time: Mon/Wed 3.45 -5.05 pm
Room: 215 Hall of Languages

Description

The influence of Islamic cultures is felt around the globe. From mosques in Washington DC to Xian, China, from souks in Marakesh to the Kutub Minar in Delhi, internet and global media have made it possible for us to appreciate this diversity and presence. Since the 7th century, Muslims traveled from Arabia to the far reaches of Central Asia and Subsaharan Africa and were inspired by the artistic forms and materials of the people they encountered. This meeting of cultures resulted in great creativity expressed through many art forms great and small including calligraphy, architecture, ceramics and ordinary objects such as pen boxes and glassware. In this course, we will try to understand the principles of beauty, virtue, and learning that fired the imagination and created the richness and variety of arts that flourished in Muslim cultures.

Just a few questions for us to explore through the course

- The relationship between religion and art
- Is Islamic art religious? Why do we call it “Islamic”?
- What is beauty? How do we go about answering this question?
- Are there some universal ideas that distinguish Islamic art
- How do local cultural traditions factor into Islamic art?
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Required Texts

The Animals Lawsuit Against Humanity: An Illustrated 10th Century Iraqi Ecological Fable translated and adapted by Rabbi Anson Laytner and Rabbi Dan Bridge (Fons Vitae: 2005).

- Description on Back Cover: *"In this fable, eloquent representatives of all members of the Animal Kingdom—from horses to bees—come before the respected Spirit King to complain of the dreadful treatment they have suffered at the hands of humankind. During the ensuing trial, where both humans and animals testify before the king, both sides argue their points ingeniously, deftly illustrating the validity of both sides of the ecology debate."*

Understanding Islam and the Muslims: The Muslim Family, Islam and World Peace by T.J. Winter and John A. Williams (Fons Vitae: 2002).

- From publisher Fons Vitae: *"Myths and misunderstanding continue to proliferate about Islam and its millions of followers worldwide. Through stunning photography provided by ARAMCO World and an accessible question and answer format this newly-expanded version of America's most popular short introduction to the key precepts of Islam offers succinct, and sometimes surprising, answers to frequently asked questions about the Muslim faith."*

Islamic Arts by Jonathan Bloom & Sheila S. Blair (Phaidon:1997).

- From Back Cover: *"In this comprehensive survey, the authors highlight those characteristics that connect the various arts of all the Islamic lands, without minimizing the differences. Dividing the time into three periods: 600-900, 900-1500 and 1500-1800, they set the artistic development in each era within its historical context and use art as a window into Islamic culture. Written in a lively and accessible style, and illustrated throughout with photographs, maps and plans, the book captures the essence of Islamic culture as expressed in its buildings, books and applied arts."*

The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain by Menacal, Maria Rosa (Back Bay Books: 2002).

- From Library Journal: *"Menacal offers persuasive evidence that the Renaissance was strongly foreshadowed by the intellectual climate of Spain in the preceding centuries, starting in 783 with the founding of Andalusia by Abd al-Rahman, an Umayyad from Syria. The culture created was receptive to intellectual pursuits not allowed in the rest of Europe for several centuries, including the creation of impressive libraries and the study and translation of Classical authors. Menacal claims that this environment was largely a result of the tolerance shown by this ruler and his successors toward Christians and Jews and their cultures."*

Beauty in Arabic Culture by Doris Behrens-Abouseif (Princeton Press:1999).

- From Library Journal: *"Although the arts were appreciated and promoted throughout the Arabic-Muslim world for centuries, there were no theoretical writings on the arts similar to those in classical Europe. However, as is the case in premodern and traditional cultures, the absence of aesthetic theory in Arab culture did not preclude the awareness of the link between beauty and art, beauty for pleasure, and moral beauty. In this analysis of the Arabic discourse on beauty in architecture, decorative arts, music, and literature, Behrens-Abouseif (Univ. of Munich) provides a variety of examples of the concepts of beauty in classical Arabic-Muslim culture."*

Course Evaluation

- Attendance and Participation is mandatory 15%
Except for medical emergencies and a doctor's note, every class missed incurs a penalty of -2%.
- Weekly Reflection Papers 30%
You will post a reflection paper on Blackboard by noon Sunday. Late papers will not get marks. Select an object, image, sentence or paragraph from the assigned reading. Indicate the page. Discuss it: Why did you select it? What are the issues? Do you have a position? (~1 page - 250-300 words)
- Two Short Studies *Due Oct 7 and Nov 4* 20%
This is partly a preparation for the final assignment (see below). Identify three or four objects or images - only one of which is in the textbooks -- and investigate their historical background, physical dimensions, and social/political meaning. (Make sure you document your sources.) You'll do two of these, with the idea of building them up to a final paper/project (~ 4 pages each including sources but images are separate.)
- Final Research Paper *Due Dec 14* 35%
You need to identify early on what you want to investigate for your final project and discuss this with me. There will be two parts: a class presentation and a submission of the final paper. The images referred to and a complete bibliography must be included. There are three levels: description and background; analysis of issues; your position or assessment. (~ 10-12 pages including sources but images are separate).

The two studies and research paper must be submitted on time. The penalty for not meeting the deadline is a drop of half a grade. Late papers will not be accepted a week beyond the due date.

Very Important Notes

The penalty of plagiarism is an F grade. It's simple: *don't copy, don't modify, give full credit*. Essentially, plagiarism is a combination of stealing and lying. Don't do it. To learn more: <http://academicintegrity.syr.edu>.

If you have a disability, it is important for you to register with the Office of Disability Services (315-443-4498). We would like to make every effort to support you and provide a positive learning environment. To be provided with accommodations, you require an Authorization letter from ODS. To learn more, please visit ODS website.

Schedule:

Note: The schedule is subject to change. The string of holidays in the first month may require adjustments.

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| Wk 1 | Aug 31/Sept 2 | Introduction to Courses What is "Islam"? | |
| Wk 2 | Sept 7 Sept 9 | Labor Day: No class Basic beliefs and diversity Winter & Williams, all | |
| Wk 3 | Sept 14/16 | Divine Word: Qur'an Revelation & Recitation *See Blackboard | |
| Wk 4 | Sept 21 Sept 23 | Eid: No Class Divine Pen: Qur'an Calligraphy & the Book Abouseif 1-34; Bloom 1-20; 57-78 | |
| Wk 5 | Sept 28 Sept 30 | Yom Kippur: No Class Word as Art: Poetry, Story, Fable Bloom 191-220; 329-360; Abouseif 71-105 | |
| Wk 6 | Oct 5/7 | Virtue: Ethics and Aesthetics Animal's Lawsuit, all Menocal, 147-157; 189-215 | <i>Oct 7: 1st Study Due</i> |
| Wk 7 | Oct 12/14 | Beauty as Proportion & Learning Abouseif 37-70; 107-164 | |
| Wk 8 | Oct 19/21 | Spaces: the Sacred and Profane Abouseif 165-185; *Blackboard | |
| Wk 9 | Oct 26/28 | Gardens: Heavenly Beauty, Earthly Paradise *Blackboard | |
| Wk 10 | Nov 2/4 | Mosque, Mihrabs and Minarets Bloom, 21-56; *Blackboard | <i>Nov 4: 2nd Study Due</i> |

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| Wk 11 | Nov 9/11 | From East to West: Mosques today *Blackboard |
| Wk 12 | Nov 16/18 | Creativity and Cultural Contact Bloom 141-186; Menocal 1-100 |
| Wk 13 | Nov 23 Nov 25 | Turkey & India Bloom 295-328, *Blackboard Thanksgiving: No class |
| Wk 14 | Nov 30 / Dec 2 | Class Presentations |
| Wk 15 | Dec 7/9 | Class Presentations |
| Wk 16 | Dec 14 | <i>Mon Dec 14 Final Papers Due</i> |