

How to Look at a Qur'an

Freer|Sackler Educator Resource

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 Smithsonian



How to Look at a Qur'an

More than just “right to left”

There's more than one way to “read” this manuscript. An artist might be interested in the beauty of the illumination and the style of the calligraphy. A historian might study the colophon, a statement at the end of a book that gives information about its production. A practicing Muslim might read and recite a particular chapter (*sura*).

For Muslims, the Qur'an is the Word of God. It was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad through the Archangel Gabriel. Followers of the Prophet wrote down the oral message of the Qur'an in the years after his death in 632.

The Qur'an consists of around 6,240 verses that are arranged into 114 chapters of different lengths. The text of this Qur'an is written in Arabic, which is read from right to left. Most of the longer chapters are at the beginning of the text. Chapter titles and separations between verses are usually highlighted with colorful designs that help readers navigate their way through the pages. Most people read and study the text, and some believers memorize the entire Qur'an in order to recite it orally.

Detail above, cover, and interior poster:

SINGLE-VOLUME QUR'AN

Copied by Shams al-Baysunghuri

Historic Iran, present-day Afghanistan, Herat, Timurid period, 1434 (AH 837)

Ink, color, and gold on paper

Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts, TIEM 294, folios 1b–2a

About This Work of Art

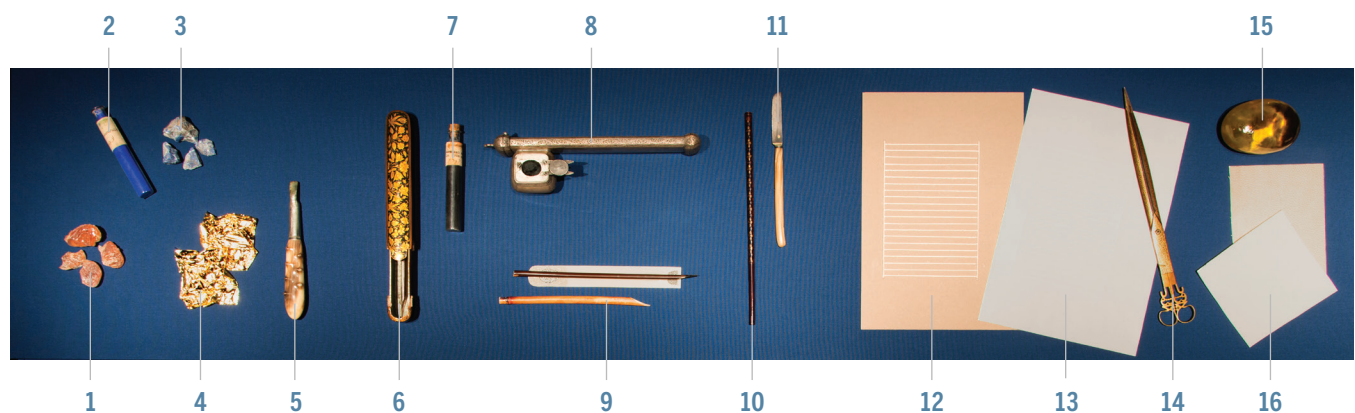
The arts of the book

This poster features a double-paged frontispiece of a Qur'an. The manuscript was completed by a team of artisans almost six hundred years ago in 1434 in the city of Herat in present-day Afghanistan.

As is customary, this Qur'an was copied in Arabic, the language of Islam. Pens were typically made from reeds or bamboo. The tip, or nip, was expertly cut and shaped by hand. The pen's thickness and the nib's angle determined the size and shape of letters. Different pens were used for various scripts and letters. Two main types of inks were used: a dark black, carbon-based ink made from burning twigs and mixing the soot with gum arabic, and a warmer brown ink made from gallnuts.

Islam discourages the use of pictures of people and animals in religious art because such images might distract believers from their worship. Qur'ans, like this example, are often decorated with colorful non-figurative designs as a result. The frontispiece's center design is a lobed gold medallion surrounded by geometric strap work. Framing this are two richly illuminated borders, a narrow band with a green background and a thicker band with a blue background.

Artists utilized natural materials to illuminate Qur'ans with brilliant colors and intricate designs. They applied rich shades and hues of blue, green, red, and especially gold for decoration. The blue color was made from the semiprecious mineral lapis lazuli, which was originally found only in Afghanistan. The extensive use of rare and costly gold and color adds a sense of light and brilliance to the page. The bright colors and detailed motifs divide chapters and help readers find their way through this important text. Such illuminations require a lot of time and great skill, and they are considered works of art.



1 Gum arabic **2** Powdered lapis lazuli **3** Lapis lazuli **4** Gold leaf **5** Burnisher (S1990.67) **6** Pen case (S2014.17.34a-b) **7** Powdered carbon black ink **8** Pen case with attached inkwell (S2015.13) **9** Penrest (S1991.13), Pen (S1991.12) **10** Shaft for stylus (S1991.9) **11** Pen knife (S1991.7) **12** Ruling board (*matar*) **13** Paper with indented lines from *matar* **14** Scissors (S1990.66) **15** Burnisher **16** Parchment fragments showing flesh and hair sides (12 and 15 courtesy Walters Art Museum, Baltimore)

About the Artists

A team effort

Making a manuscript and transforming it into a book was a team effort. In a labor-intensive process, artisans prepared the paper, calligraphers copied the text, illuminators added designs in gold and bright colors, and binders sewed the individual manuscript pages into a book.

Of all the many artists who worked on this manuscript in the royal workshop in Herat, only the calligrapher's name is provided. He is Muhammad ibn Husam, which means Muhammad, son of Husam. He taught the art of calligraphy to his patron, Prince Baysunghur (1397–1433). Out of his great respect and admiration for the artist, the prince gave Muhammad the honorific name Shams al-Baysunghuri, "the sun of Baysunghur," supposedly because his talent outshone other calligraphers.

Prince Baysunghur commissioned this Qur'an, but he died before it was completed. One page of the colophon at the end of the text (see below) states the finished book is dedicated to Ala' al-Dawla Mirza, the prince's seventeen-year-old son.



Prince Baysunghur

Ala' al-Dawla Mirza (son of Prince Baysunghur)

Shams al-Baysunghuri (calligrapher of this Qur'an)

ONE PAGE OF THE COLOPHON FROM THE SINGLE-VOLUME QUR'AN

Copied by Shams al-Baysunghuri

Historic Iran, present-day Afghanistan, Herat,

Timurid period, 1434 (AH 837)

Ink, color, and gold on paper

Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts, TIEM 294, folio 279b

About the Timurid Empire

Circa 1370–1507

This manuscript was completed during the Timurid dynasty. More than six hundred years ago, the Timurids built a vast empire that controlled much of Iran and Central Asia by the early fifteenth century. The dynasty is named after Timur, who reigned from 1370 to 1405. Known as Tamerlane in the West, he was a descendant of the great Mongol ruler Ghenghis Khan (1162–1227). Timur built immense structures to assert the wealth and power of his empire, and he brought artists and craftsmen from far and wide to his capital of Samarqand, now in Uzbekistan.

Prince Baysunghur was one of Timur's many grandsons. He served as the governor of Herat, located in present-day Afghanistan, from 1417 until his death in 1433. During this time, Herat grew into a bustling city known for its grand architecture and luxurious gardens. Like other rulers before him, Prince Baysunghur brought master artists, illuminators, calligraphers, and binders to his royal workshop and continued to patronize the arts of the book. The works created in Herat at the time were admired and avidly collected for centuries.



MODERN MAP
OF THE REGION

Guiding Questions

The following thinking routines are from the Harvard Project Zero Artful Thinking program. For more information see pzartfulthinking.org

Colors/Shapes/Lines

Look at the artwork for a moment.

What **colors** do you see?

What **shapes** do you see?

What **lines** do you see?

“This routine helps students make detailed observations by drawing their attention to the forms in an artwork—its formal aspects—and giving them specific categories of things to look for. It can be used with any kind of visual art. It can also be used with visually rich non-art images or objects. Like the *Looking: Ten Times Two* routine below, students can use the routine on its own, or prior to having a discussion about an artwork with another routine. It is especially useful before a writing activity because it helps students develop descriptive language.”

Looking: Ten Times Two

1. Look at the artwork quietly for at least thirty seconds. Let your eyes wander.
2. List ten words or phrases about any aspect of the artwork.
3. Repeat the first two steps. Look at the artwork again and try to add ten more words or phrases to your list.

“This routine helps students slow down and make careful, detailed observations by encouraging them to push beyond first impressions and obvious features.”

Parts/Purposes/Complexities

What are the parts of this artwork?

(What are its pieces or components?)

Why do you think this artwork was created?

(What is its purpose? What does it do?)

What are some of the relationships between this artwork’s part(s) and purpose(s)?

“This routine helps students build a multi-dimensional mental model of a topic by identifying different aspects of the topic and considering various ways in which the topic is complex. It can be used with many different things—with objects (sea shells, microscope, buildings), topics (fractions, grammar, electricity, democracy), and works of art. It’s important for an example of the topic to be readily accessible to students, either physically or mentally. If the object is physically visible, students don’t need a lot of background knowledge. If it is a conceptual topic, like democracy, it’s helpful for students to have background knowledge of a particular instance of it.”

Additional Resources

We invite teachers of all levels to adapt this resource. Use the poster to spark classroom discussion or inspire student assignments in a variety of disciplines, including art, social studies, science, music, Arabic language, and language arts.

Related Artworks

asia.si.edu/collections/edan/default.cfm

This manuscript is in the collection of the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts in Istanbul. To study other Qur’ans and related objects in the Freer|Sackler’s permanent collection, use Open F|S, our online search tool featuring more than 40,000 high-resolution images available to download free. You can also use the online resources for *The Art of the Qur’an* exhibition, on view at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery from October 22, 2016, to February 20, 2017, at asia.si.edu/artofquran

Arts of the Islamic World: A Teacher’s Guide and Additional Educator Resources

asia.si.edu/explore/listByArea.asp?browse-Topic=3

These Freer|Sackler resources feature artworks from the Islamic world, introduce Islam, and provide lesson plans.

Learning Standards

NCHS

World History Era 5, Standard 5C. The student understands major political developments in Asia in the aftermath of the collapse of Mongol rule and the plague pandemic.

Gr. 7-12: Assess the impact of the conquests of Timur (Tamerlane) on Central Asia, Southwest Asia, and India and evaluate Timurid contributions to arts and sciences.

NCSS

D2.His.3.6-8. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to analyze why they, and the developments they shaped, are seen as historically significant.

D2.His.3.9-12. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context.

D2.His.13.3-5. Use information about a historical source, including the maker, date, place of origin, intended audience, and purpose to judge the extent to which the source is useful for studying a particular topic.

D2.His.13.6-8. Evaluate the relevancy and utility of a historical source based on information such as maker, date, place of origin, intended audience, and purpose.

Common Core

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7

Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

NAEA National Core Arts Standards

Anchor Standard #7. Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Anchor Standard #8. Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

Anchor Standard #11. Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

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Smithsonian Institution

Address

1050 Independence Ave SW
Washington, DC 20013-7012

Hours

10 am to 5:30 pm daily
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and public programs

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weeks in advance using the online form available
at asia.si.edu/visit/schooltours.asp#reservation.

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If your group of ten or more people plans to visit
the galleries on your own, please let us know by
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online form available at asia.si.edu/visit/self-GuidedForm.asp. Space in the galleries is limited,
and advance registration for groups helps us
avoid crowding.

General Information

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Other questions? Call 202.633.4880

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