

Activity 3

Reading Like a Historian

Art of the Islamic World

Part A: Using Source Materials

HISTORICAL CONTEXT Islam is the religion based on the revelations of Allah to the prophet Muhammad. Islamic culture—including art, architecture, and literature—expresses the religion’s teachings and values.

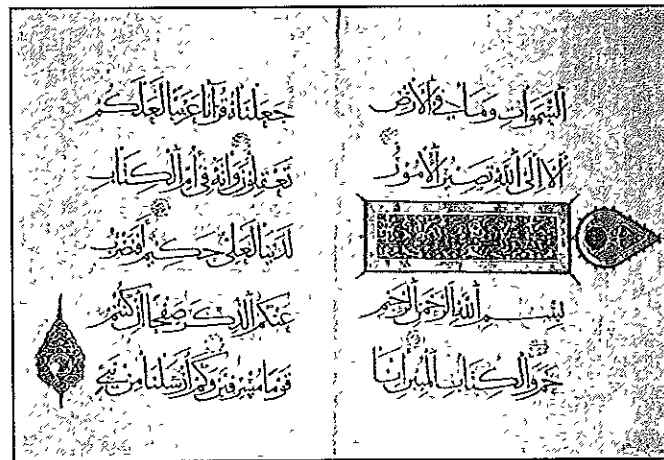
TASK Using information from the documents and your knowledge of world history, answer the questions that follow each document in Part A. Your answers to the questions will help you prepare the Part B multimedia presentation.

DIRECTIONS Examine the following documents and answer the short-answer questions that follow each document.

DOCUMENT 1

Two pages from a Qur’an manuscript, c. 1300

Illumination by Mohammad ebn Aibak, calligraphy by Ahmad ebn Sohrevardi



© Islamic Arts Museum, Tehran, Iran/
The Bridgeman Art Library

1. What are the major features of the art on these Qur’an pages?

2. What might the development of this art form suggest about the importance of the Qur’an to Muslims?

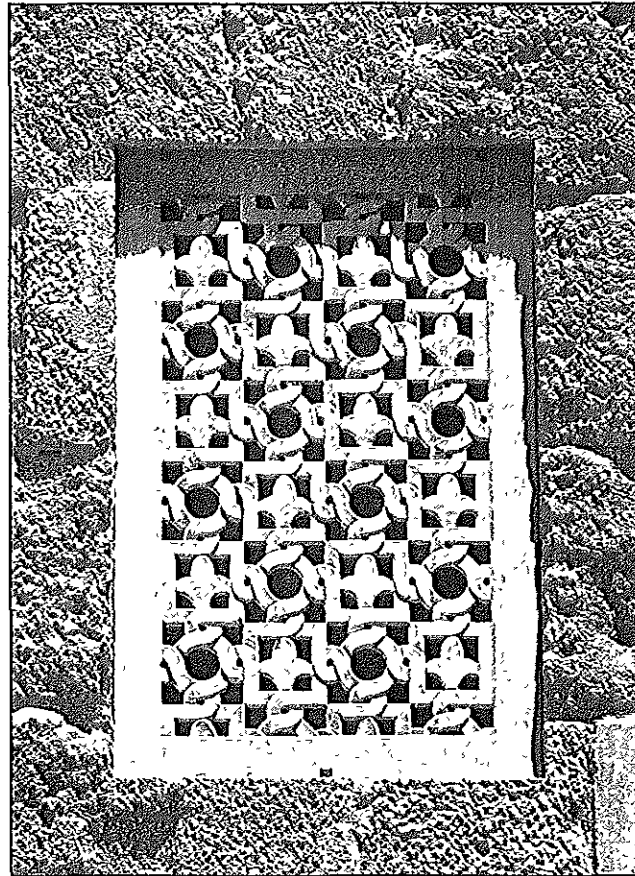
Activity 3

Reading Like a Historian Art of the Islamic World

DOCUMENT 2

Window in the West Wall of the Great Mosque, Cordoba, Spain

Before You View Islam discourages the depiction of human or animal figures in art. For this reason, much of the art produced in the Islamic world features repeated floral patterns and geometric designs—sometimes referred to as arabesque. For the Muslim artist, these motifs reflect beliefs and attitudes about Allah, Islam, and the natural world. They also reflect an interest in and knowledge of mathematics.



© Ken Welsh/The Bridgeman Art Library

3. What are the key features of the arabesque style? How does the window incorporate these features?

4. How does the arabesque style reflect an appreciation for mathematics?

Activity 3

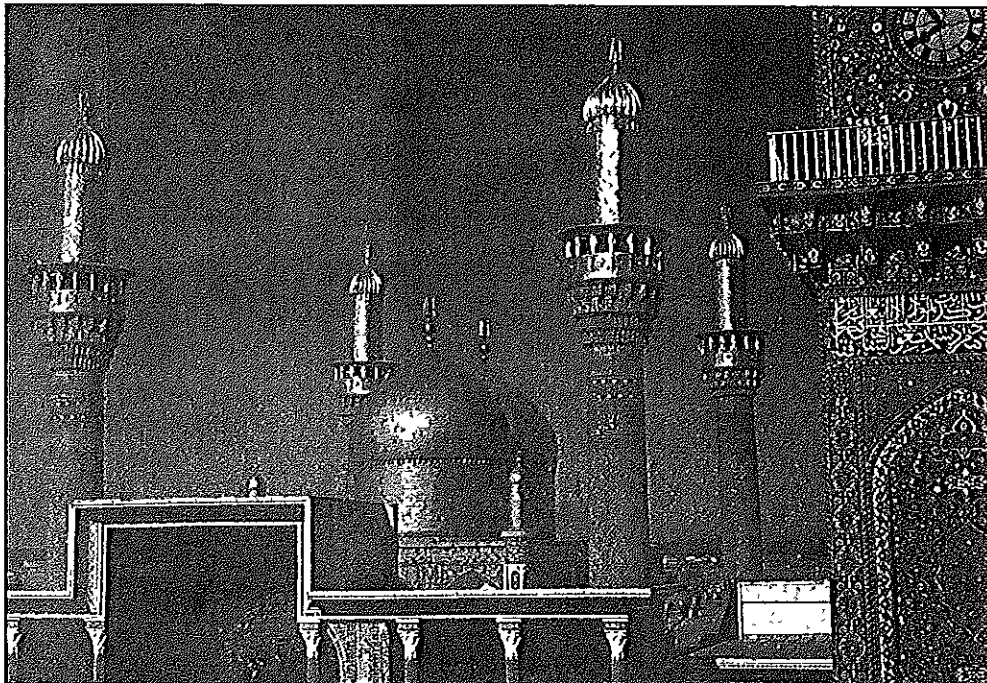
Reading Like a Historian

Art of the Islamic World

DOCUMENT 3

Minarets and Domes of the Kazimayn Mosque, Baghdad, Iraq

Before You View Islam gave rise to a distinctive form of architecture. This architecture is most spectacularly displayed in the minarets and domes of mosques—Islamic places of worship. What function do the minarets of a mosque serve?



© Charles & Josette Lenars/CORBIS

5. Why do you think the mosque shown in this photograph is so elaborately decorated? What does this decoration suggest about the builders' feelings toward Islam?

6. What other Islamic art forms or styles are reflected in the image of the Kazimayn Mosque?

Activity 3

Reading Like a Historian

Art of the Islamic World

DOCUMENT 4

Before You Read Within Islam, a group known as the Sufis developed a special type of religious practice. Their goal was a deeper, more intense relationship with Allah. One way Sufis seek to achieve this relationship is through vivid poetry.

Your hope in my heart is the rarest treasure
Your Name on my tongue is the sweetest word
My choicest hours
Are the hours I spend with You—
O Allah, I can't live in this world
Without remembering You—
How can I endure the next world
Without seeing Your face?
I am a stranger in Your country
And lonely among Your worshippers:
This is the substance of my complaint.

—Rabi'ah al-Adawiyya, "My Greatest Need Is You," c. 740

7. Whom is the poet addressing in this poem? What message is the poem meant to convey?

8. How does expressing herself through poetry affect Rabi'ah al-Adawiyya's message? Explain your answer.

Activity 3

Reading Like a Historian

Art of the Islamic World

DOCUMENT 5

Before You Read Storytelling was a rich tradition in the Arab world from which Islam emerged. The following selection comes from a collection of stories featuring the exploits of a trickster named Abul-Fath al-Iskanderi, who relies on his wits to survive.

I was in Baghdad at the time of the azaz date harvest . . . My eyes fell upon a man . . . standing still with outstretched hand . . .

“Alas! I have neither two handfuls of Sawíq [porridge],
 Nor melted fat mixed with flour,
 Nor spacious bowl filled with Khirdíq [broth],
 To soothe [my] palate,
 And to remove [me] from the path of beggary.
 O Giver of plenty after poverty!
 Make it easy for some brave and liberal man
 Of pedigree and hereditary glory,
 To guide to [me] the feet of fortune
 And release my life from the grip of trouble” . . .

I took from my purse a handful and gave it to him. Then he said:
 “O the one who hath bestowed upon me his excellent kindness!
 To God do I communicate his glorious secret,
 And I pray God to keep him well-guarded,
 If I have not the ability to thank him,
 Then God, my Lord, will surely recompense [repay] him” . . .

So I said to him, “There is something left in the purse, therefore [show me your face] and I will give thee all.” Then he removed his veil, and to by Heavens! it was . . . Abul-Fath al-Iskanderi! So I exclaimed: “Mercy on thee, how astute [clever] thou art!”

—Badí al-Zamán al-Hamdadhání, *The Maqama of the Date*, c. 975

9. Why do you think the narrator gives the man money?

10. How do you think this story reflects the influence of Islam?
