

*Islamic Art: Mirror of the Invisible World* (2012)

Directed by Robert Gardner

Produced by Michael Wolfe and Alex Kronemer

**Introductory Essay and Viewing Considerations**

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*Islamic Art: Mirror of the Invisible World* is a comprehensive overview of the visual arts produced in Islamic lands, from West Africa to India, since the rise of Islam more than 1,400 years ago. The physical objects that any culture produces reveal many aspects of that culture, often those that are not to be found in other sources, such as the news media or even that culture's own stories and other literature. This film was conceived in consultation with scholars to explore Islamic art as a window into Muslim cultures.

Gardner Films, the production company of director Robert Gardner, previously made the three-hour PBS documentary *Islam: Empire of Faith* (2001), an exploration of the first thousand years of Islamic history. That film places a strong emphasis on culture, especially the visual arts, but *Islamic Art* goes further, covering more regions and more artistic techniques. Rather than follow a chronological scheme through the myriad overlapping dynasties that ruled in various regions of the Muslim world at different times, the filmmakers organized this new work thematically. It focuses on five themes—The Word, Space, Ornament, Color, and Water—that can be found in many of the works of art produced in Muslim societies. Many of these same themes are characteristic of other art traditions. All artists love color, for example, and Chinese and Japanese art shows a love of calligraphy, or beautiful writing, similar to that seen in Islamic art. But together, these five themes embrace many of the characteristics of Islamic art over the centuries.

“Islamic art” can be a confusing rubric. It encompasses not only art-made specifically for religious purposes, but also secular art made in Muslim-majority societies, where Islam is the dominant if not sole religion. Therefore, a mosque or a manuscript of the Qur'an would certainly qualify as Islamic art, but so would a ceramic bowl or a rosewater sprinkler made in medieval Iran. For instance, the Great Mosque of Córdoba and the Alhambra Palace in Granada are both in Spain, where Muslims maintained a significant presence during the Middle Ages. While one is a house of worship and the other was built to serve as a fortress and emir's residence, they are both extraordinary examples of Islamic art. By the same token, if on a smaller physical scale, a manuscript of the Qur'an would certainly qualify as Islamic art, but so would a ceramic bowl or a rosewater sprinkler made in medieval Iran. We even find examples of “Islamic art” made for Jewish or Christian patrons, such as a group of inlaid metalwares with scenes from the New Testament.

In making *Islamic Art: Mirror of the Invisible World*, the filmmakers have tried to correct some of the common misperceptions about Islam and its art. For example, many people think that Islam is concentrated in the Arab lands of the Middle East, but this film shows that Islamic art is produced from West Africa to India (and beyond). Many people

believe that Islam forbids figural imagery, but viewers see that this is not true: while Muslims disapprove of figures in religious art, their secular art often depicts human or animal figures. And while many people believe that turmoil is the chief characteristic of Islamic culture, this film shows the celebration of peace and beauty in Islamic civilization throughout its history.

### **Humanities Themes**

Islamic art as a window into Islamic culture: The physical objects any culture produces reveal many aspects of that culture, often those that other sources—its traditional stories and other literature—may not.

Artists throughout the Muslim world transform everyday objects into works of aesthetic enjoyment: Rather than make monumental sculptures and paintings to decorate the palaces and places of worship of the rich and powerful, artists in Muslim societies often focus their efforts on embellishing smaller objects used in daily life, such as carpets, bowls, pitchers, and trays.

The themes of The Word, Space, Ornament, Color, and Water are present in many artistic traditions, but are particularly important in the arts of the Islamic lands because of these places' religious and historical traditions as well as their climate and geography.

### **Sample Discussion Points**

Why do you think “The Word” is the first of the five themes? Why are manuscripts of the Qur’an so beautiful? Why are Qur’anic inscriptions found so often on buildings and other works of art?

Arabic script reads from right to left. Does this fact affect how you view Islamic art after seeing this film? How might this affect the way a viewer looks at Islamic art?

What are the most common types of objects shown in this film? What materials were they made from? How were they used and in what settings? How might you explain why this is? How are these works of art different from what you might expect to find in a typical art museum?

Some people consider Islamic art to be the art of a faith, while others think of it as the art made in a particular place at a particular time. What do you think? What would you consider to be the spiritual/religious aspects and themes in Islamic art?

Do you find Islamic art compelling? If so, what draws you to it? Are there aspects of it that you find confusing or unfamiliar? If so, why?