

Contemporary Islamic Graffiti: The New Illuminated Manuscript



Click the following video link on contemporary Graffiti artist Mohammed Ali. Mohammed was invited to be a part of the Eid Festival at the Riksatern Theatre in Gothenburg Sweden, by the British Council in Seden. He painted a unique cube over a 2 day period outside of the museum, where he engages with the people around him while he paints.

<http://www.aerosolarabic.com/portfolio/mohammed-ali-in-sweden/>

Overview

The following lesson is part of a Visual Arts instructional unit exploring Graffiti as a visual art form expressing contemporary ideas of Islamic culture. Historically, Illuminated manuscripts (especially Illuminated Qur'ans) were instrumental in spreading ideas of Islam. The function, form and style development of Illuminated manuscripts correlated with the need to not only record and spread the revelations bestowed upon the prophet Muhammad, but also to signify the importance and reverence of the word of Allah.

Contemporary Islamic Graffiti developed in response to a need to illuminate contemporary ideas of Islam in a visual platform that is not only visually captivating, but in the public sphere. Graffiti tends to challenge perceptions and hold a visual mirror up for society to reflect upon cultural practices and structures. Contemporary Islamic Graffiti artists Muhammed Ali and eL Seed are creating a platform for spreading contemporary ideas of Islam and challenging stereotypes and perceptions of Muslims and Islam as a monolithic religion.

In this unit, students will first explore the visual art form of Historic Illuminated Manuscripts and engage in critical analysis of at least one historic work. Students will then participate in group seminar to understand the role of perception set in our aesthetic response to Islamic art forms: Illuminated Manuscript and Contemporary Islamic Graffiti. Students will explore the works of Contemporary Islamic Graffiti artists. In addition, students will compare function, form, aesthetics and intent of Historical Illuminated manuscripts and Contemporary Graffiti in order to understand the power both platforms had on spreading ideas of Islam. The culminating unit project will engage students in creating a Graffiti work that addresses a personal stereotype utilizing process, techniques, concepts of stereotype/perception learned during this unit.

Grade

9-12, Community College

Subject

Visual Arts: Proficient (teacher can easily modify lesson for Beginning, Intermediate, Advanced, AP 2-D studio art)

Essential Standards

Visual Literacy

- P.V.1 Use the language of visual arts to communicate effectively.
- P.V.1.1 Use art vocabulary to analyze compositions.
- P.V.1.3 Recognize contemporary styles, themes, and genres in art.

This lesson was created by Anita Rubino-Thomas as part of the Global Islam and the Arts Teacher Fellows program. For more information about the program, please visit ncmideast.org.

- P.V.2 Apply creative and critical thinking skills to artistic expression.
- P.V.2.1 Implement planning to arrive at original solutions to artistic problems.

Contextual Relevancy

- P.CX.1 Understand the global, historical, societal, and cultural contexts of the visual arts
- P.CX.1.2 Understand how personal perspective is influenced by temporal context.
- P.CX.1.3 Exemplify contemporary art and artists.
- P.CX.1.4 Understand how personal aesthetic responses to art are influenced by culture.

Critical Response

- P.CR.1 Use critical analysis to generate responses to a variety of prompts.
- P.CR.1.1 Differentiate between personal aesthetic response and objective critical response to art.
- P.CR.1.2 Critique personal art based on reflective inquiry.

Essential Questions

- How does our perception set (culture + individual experiences/beliefs) shape our reactions and understanding of art from other cultures? Why is it important to recognize the role our perception set has on our aesthetic response to art?
- How does contextual information impact or help inform our aesthetic responses to art in general and to Islamic art in particular?
- How does Islamic Illuminated Manuscripts and Islamic Graffiti artists utilize art to unify diverse identities in Islamic cultures?
- What role did the illuminated Manuscripts/Qur'ans have upon spreading Islam?
- What role does Graffiti have in breaking stereotypes about Islam and spreading contemporary ideas on Islam?
- What process/techniques/training were necessary in the creation of illuminated manuscripts? What process/techniques/training are necessary in the creation of Islamic Graffiti?
- How and in what ways does the art form of Calligraphy transform the written word?
- What are characteristics of Islamic Calligraphy?
- How and why do artists blend calligraphy techniques with graffiti techniques to express modern ideas of Islam?

Materials/Equipment

- Teacher access to computer with projection capabilities and speakers
- Laptop or computer access for each student
- Student sketchbooks and drawing materials
- Subjective Aesthetic Response Survey (attached)
- "With which image do you engage?" slide (attached)
- Objective Response to Islamic Illuminated Work group document (attached)
- Objective Response to Islamic Art Works handout (attached)
- "What is Calligraphy?" article and questions (attached)
- Islamic Illuminated Manuscripts PowerPoint
- Spread of Islam via Illuminated Manuscripts handout (attached)
- "Perception" by graffiti artist eL Seed (attached)
- Islamic Graffiti PowerPoint
- Slide: compare/contrast Illuminated Manuscript with Muhammed Ali's Graffiti artwork (attached)
- Compare/Contrast of Illuminated Manuscripts and Contemporary Islamic Graffiti worksheet (attached)

Duration

5 days of 80-minute classes + optional culminating unit project in which students create a Graffiti work.

Teacher Resources

- Video on Evaluating Art Through Different Lenses <https://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/lenses-and-art-getty>
- Contemporary Islamic Calligraphy Exhibition 'NUN WA AL QALAM' http://islamicartsmagazine.com/magazine/view/contemporary_islamic_calligraphy_exhibition_nun_wa_al_qalam/
- Islamic Arts & Architecture <http://islamic-arts.org/>
- Remix and Globalization of Street Art: Post-Modern Flair, Graffiti, and Arabic Calligraphy <https://blogs.commons.georgetown.edu/cctp-725-fall2014/2014/05/03/remix-and-globalization-of-street-art-post-modern-flair-graffiti-and-arabic-calligraphy-draft/>
- Archive of illuminated manuscripts: <http://www.islambook.net/bbs/archiver/showtopic-1585-13.aspx>
- Library exhibit from Southern Methodist University on manuscripts in the Islamic tradition: http://www.smu.edu/Bridwell/SpecialCollectionsandArchives/Exhibitions/IslamicText/MS31_1600
- The art of Mohammed Ali Aerosol: <http://www.aerosolarabic.com/>
- Illuminated Islamic Manuscript collection at Yale University <https://www.library.yale.edu/neareast/exhibitions/exhibit20071.html>
- Baker, Colin F. *Qur'an Manuscripts Calligraphy, Illumination, Design*. The British Library. London, 2007.
- Deroche, Francis. *The Abbasid Tradition: Qur'ans of the 8th to 10th Century*. Nour Foundation with Oxford University Press. New York, 1992.

Student Preparation

Before beginning this lesson, students should have a basic understanding of Islam. As homework before beginning this unit, assign this short article for students to read, "How to Evaluate Art: A layman's guide to understanding personal aesthetics" <http://www.davidhcunningham.com/2013/02/evaluate-art-laymans-guide-understanding-personal-aesthetics/>.

Procedure

Day One: Seminar: Understanding Subjective Response to Islamic Art versus Objective Response

1. Tell students that today's class will explore how our perception set (culture + individual experiences/beliefs) shapes our reactions and understanding of art from other cultures. Tell students that "subjective" refers to personal perspectives, feelings, or opinions entering the decision making process, while "objective" refers to the elimination of subjective perspectives and a process that is purely based on hard facts. Tell students that subjective/ personal preference can be the product of our environment.
2. 10-15 mins: Have students independently complete the Subjective Aesthetic Response Survey (attached) to begin student reflection on subjective aesthetic response versus objective aesthetic response. Then, project the attached slide with two images side by side titled, "With which image do you engage?" Ask students and discuss as a class:
 - Which image from these works do you engage with?
 - WHY? What about the work engages you?
3. 65 mins: Make sure that each student has access to a computer or laptop. Put the Forming Objective Aesthetic Response questionnaire (attached) into a Google Doc and allow students to edit it simultaneously. Go over each question as a class, with the teacher guiding responses. Students should put their name in front of their typed answers on the group document. For question 9, the class should come up with their own criteria for looking at art objectively. Example criteria include:

Time: ample time to look again at the artwork to analyze and evaluate (take a second look and discover more!)

Knowledge: Contextual information that includes: artist statement, artwork information, background, culture, artist place, history of place at that time, techniques, art history
Intent, Function, Purpose, Meaning
Technique/process/material use
Visual Literacy: Elements of Art, Principles of Design, composition, symbolism
Creativity, Passion, love

Day Two: Historical Overview: In depth look at Islamic Illuminated Manuscripts

4. 35 mins: Review basic information about Islam. Remind students that Islam is an Abrahamic monotheistic religion. Tell students that there are about 1.8 billion Muslims in the world. Review the five pillars of Islam:
1. Shahada – professing that Allah is the true God and Muhammad is his messenger.
 2. Salat – praying five times a day in the direction of Mecca.
 3. Zakah – paying a tax or giving a certain amount of money to charity.
 4. Sawm – fasting from the sun up to sundown during the holy month of Ramadan.
 5. Hajj – going on a spiritual journey (pilgrimage) to Mecca.

Then, provide an introduction to Islamic Manuscripts by showing this video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oMfHNpvph40&list=PLS12qnwBb76cyPSanbORu4Kod8aRrUD72&index=39> . Be sure to point out variety of Illuminated Manuscripts shown in presentation. Discuss how Illuminated Manuscripts helped unify diverse cultures with Islam.

5. 45 mins: Pass out copies of the Objective Response to Islamic Art works handout. Independently, students should work on responding to the questions on the handout.
6. Assign for homework for next day: pass out copies of the “What is Calligraphy?” article and questions. Students should read the article and take notes in their sketchbook.

Day Three: Continue Historical overview of Islamic manuscripts

7. 20 min: Have students pull out sketchbooks and as a whole group, discuss the reading from assigned homework. Facilitate whole class discussion on the article:
- How does the author define *calligraphy*?
 - What characteristics are part of the calligraphy art form?
 - Do you agree or disagree with the author? explain
 - What would you add to the information?
 - How is calligraphy similar across the cultural traditions discussed in the article?
 - How is calligraphy different across the cultural traditions discussed in the article?
 - Why calligraphy?
 - In what ways do contemporary artists use calligraphy?
 - In what ways could you use calligraphy?
8. 20 mins: Instruct students to read following article on Islamic Illuminated books and take notes in their sketchbook/visual journals: http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/isbk/hd_isbk.htm.
9. 30 min: Teacher presentation on Islamic Illuminated Manuscripts: go through the Islamic Illuminated Manuscripts PowerPoint. Using slide 2, play part of the video, “Quranic Manuscripts from 8th to 18th

Century” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wpsh7Qo8KLI>). The video moves through a collection of Quranic manuscripts at the Smithsonian's Museums of Asian Art.

10. Slide 3: Tell students that Muslims believe that the Qur’an contains the literal words of God, which were spoken in Arabic. Therefore, Muslims throughout the world share a linguistic bond based on the desire to read the Qur’an in its original language. Many Muslims around the world learn to read and speak Arabic, even if Arabic is not their native language. Tell students that Illumination is the addition of visual elements to provide structure and information. Move through the components of and history of Illuminated manuscripts (slides 4-9). Show various examples of Illuminated manuscripts (slides 10-17).
11. 10 mins: Pass out copies of the Spread of Islam via Illuminated Manuscripts handout, and have students begin answering the questions. Students should finish responding to the questions for homework.

Day Four: Overview of Contemporary Islamic art using Graffiti and Text

12. 15 min: Lead a class discussion on the spread of Islam via Illuminated Manuscripts: review homework questions assigned previous class.
13. 30 min: Project the image of “Perception” by graffiti artist eL Seed image for whole class to see. Give students 2 minutes to look at image and then hide the image. Have students write down answers in their sketchbooks to the following question: What do you see and where do you see it? Allow students 2 minutes to write. Ask students to sketch what they saw and described above in their sketchbooks.
14. Begin a class discussion by asking students for their responses. Reinforce answers from students by repeating and/or paraphrasing. Ask students to utilize elements of Art/Principles of Design vocabulary. Try to avoid giving judgements of “Good”, etc.
15. Bring Graffiti artwork back up on board and ask students to look at image again and answer the following questions:
 - What else do you see and where do you see it?
 - Where do you think this artwork is located?
 - What do you think is going on? What visual text informs your ideas?At this juncture, give students some contextual information regarding artwork: tell them that it is in a particular community in Cairo, Egypt, created by the graffiti artist, el Seed. Ask students:
 - Why do you think the artist created this work?
 - How do you think the artist created this work?
16. Allow students to see contextual information: “In my new project ‘Perception’ I am questioning the level of judgment and misconception society can unconsciously have upon a community based on their differences. In the neighborhood of Manshiyat Nasr in Cairo, the Coptic community of Zaraeeb collects the trash of the city for decades and developed the most efficient and highly profitable recycling system on a global level. Still, the place is perceived as dirty, marginalized and segregated. To bring light on this community, with my team and the help of the local community, I created an anamorphic piece that covers almost 50 buildings only visible from a certain point of the Moqattam Mountain. The piece of art uses the words of Saint Athanasius of Alexandria, a Coptic Bishop from the 3rd century, that said: ‘Anyone who wants to see the sunlight clearly needs to wipe his eye first.’

The Zaraeeb community welcomed my team and I as we were family. It was one of the most amazing human experience I have ever had. They are generous, honest and strong people. They have been given the name of Zabaleen (the garbage people), but this is not how they call themselves. They don’t live in the

garbage but from the garbage; and not their garbage, but the garbage of the whole city. They are the one who clean the city of Cairo.”

Ask the following questions:

- Why did the artist choose this location?
- What do you notice about the quote written in graffiti?
- Why do you think the artist utilized calligraphy?
- What do you think is the relationship between location and the quote?
- Why do you think the artist chose to write the quote in Arabic?
- What does this work make you wonder?
- What additional information would you like to find out about the artist?

17. 35-40 mins: Lead a presentation on contemporary Islamic Graffiti using the Islamic graffiti PowerPoint. Moving through the slides, click on the links and allow students to view imagery and ask their opinions. Be sure to ask students to be aware of what “lens” they are using in looking at work.
18. Assign for homework: Reflective Visual Journal: Visual close read upon student chosen image of Islamic Graffiti utilizing 1) subjective response and 2) objective response/criteria developed from Day One.

Day Five: Continue Overview of Contemporary Islamic art using Graffiti and Text

19. 80 min: Small/Whole group discussion on connections between Islamic Illuminated Manuscripts and Islamic Graffiti: Project the slide with the Illuminated Manuscript side by side with Muhammed Ali’s Graffiti artwork and facilitate discussion among small groups:
 - Do you see any similar visual characteristics between Illuminated manuscripts and Islamic Graffiti?
 - Do you see any differing visual characteristics between illuminated manuscripts and Islamic Graffiti?
 - Who is the audience for Illuminated works?
 - Who is the audience for Contemporary Graffiti works?
 - Do you similarities between the function of illuminated manuscripts and Islamic Graffiti?
 - Do you see differences between function of illuminated manuscripts and Islamic Graffiti?
20. Pass out the Compare/Contrast of Illuminated Manuscripts and Contemporary Islamic Graffiti worksheet. Have students respond to the questions independently and then as a whole group in order to reinforce connections between the two art forms made throughout the lesson. Continue to project the

Possible Extension Activity

If you have time, complete the following activity: students will engage in a creative project, utilizing student directed small groups, creating Calligraffiti style works that address an issue in their local community. Complete Unit and Materials are available upon request from arubino@currituck.k12.nc.us.

Subjective Aesthetic Response Survey

In your sketchbooks, please answer the following questions:

- *What colors do you like?
 - *What do you do for entertainment?
 - *What types of books do you like to read?
 - *If you could live in any environment, where would it be?
 - *What shapes are you attracted to (draw them)?
 - *What kind of music do you like?
 - *Do you prefer comfortable clothes or stylish clothes?
 - *What genre of art do you prefer?
 - *For vacation time, would you prefer to travel or stay home?
 - *What is your reaction to “new” things?
 - *Do you like adventure?
 - *Do you like things orderly?
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- *What is bias?
- *How does bias affect your analysis/evaluation of art?