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# Architecture, the Arts, and Literature



Have you ever drawn your name or other words in an artistic way? If so, you have something in common with medieval Muslim artists. These artists considered beautiful writing to be one of the highest forms of art and an expression of their religion, Islam. The Qur'an provided the passages for this beautiful writing.

### MAIN IDEA

Medieval Muslim dynasties produced distinctive forms of architecture, art, and writing that are highly admired today.

### BUILDING AND DESIGN

In medieval Islamic civilization, beautiful writing appeared not only in books but also in buildings. Those buildings, especially mosques, displayed many architectural features that were developed from Roman, Egyptian, Byzantine, and Persian models. However, the style of architecture soon became recognized as distinctly Islamic.

A typical mosque was topped by a large dome and had one or more **minarets**. These extremely tall, slender towers were designed to dominate the skyline and call attention to the importance of the mosque. From a minaret, a Muslim

official known as a muezzin (moo-EH-zuhn) would call out a summons to prayer.

The inside of a mosque also had distinctive features. Under the dome was the prayer hall, a large open area designed to appear spacious and full of light. Set into one wall was the mihrab (MEE-ruhb), an often richly decorated archway that indicated the direction of Mecca. While sharing these common features, mosques also incorporated local influences, so they varied in design in different locations.

The decoration inside a mosque was often elaborate, featuring elegant writing called **calligraphy** and abstract design known as **arabesque**. Arabesque consists of patterns of flowers, leaves, vines, and geometric shapes. The patterns often repeat in a seemingly endless way, representing the Muslim belief in the infinity of God's creation. Muslim artists did not portray human figures or animals. According to an interpretation of the Qur'an, the depiction of people and animals imitates God's act of creation. Muslims feared the display of such works might encourage the worship of images.

### LITERATURE

Besides distinctive architecture and art, medieval Islamic civilization also produced significant works of literature. Muslims consider the Qur'an to be the greatest literary work in the Arabic language. The best-known popular work of literature is *The Thousand and One Nights*, a collection of entertaining stories from India, Persia, and Arabia. It features such well-known characters as Aladdin and Sinbad the Sailor.

Muslims admired poetry more than any other form of literature. A four-line rhyming poem known as a quatrain was made popular by the Persian poet **Omar Khayyám** (ky-YAM), who lived from 1048 to 1131. *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, a selection of his quatrains, is considered a masterpiece of world literature.