

The Writing on the Wall: Making Calligraphic Portraits



Hilye, c. 1700-12

Turkish

Ink, color, and gold on paper

Harvard Art Museum, Arthur M. Sackler Museum,
The Edwin Binney, 3rd Collection of Turkish Art at
the Harvard Art Museum, 1985.288

Grades:	6 – 9
Subjects:	English Language Arts, Social Science, Fine Arts, Foreign Languages
Time Required:	2 – 4 periods, 45 minutes each
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Lesson Overview

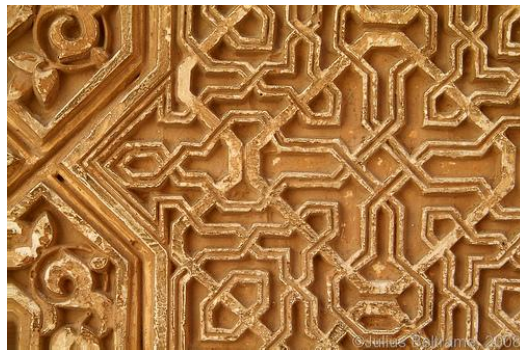
The students will learn about the life of Muhammad and the foundation of Islam. They will see that Islamic art is predominantly non-figural and that Islamic artists have developed vivid alternatives to figures using patterns and words. Reflecting on the way that words and writing can form rich visual patterns, students will make a written portrait of someone who is important to them.

Materials

- Reproduction of *Hilye*
- Heavyweight textured paper
- Writing tools: pens, markers, ink, brushes
- Oil pastels or crayons

Lesson Steps

1. Have students look closely at *Hilye* (pronounced HILL-ya). See how much students can figure out about the work when they take time to look at it, think about it, and share ideas.
2. Use a brainstorming technique, such as Pair Share, to get them started before sharing with the whole class.
 - Pair Share: Students turn to a partner and take turns naming one thing that they notice about the painting. After naming some of the most obvious things, they will soon begin to look more deeply and notice things that their partners did not. They should remember to share these ideas in the discussion later.
3. Use the following questions to begin a discussion.
 - What do you see? What can you find out about the work?
 - How was the work made?
 - The hilye is a calligraphic portrait of Muhammad. The word *calligraphy* comes from Greek meaning, “beautiful writing.” The artist used gold and pigment on paper to write and decorate the words.
 - What are the symbols? What could they mean? Why are they so elaborate?
 - The symbols are calligraphy. They represent the name and physical description of Muhammad. Because Muslims do not practice figural representation, they use patterns and script to elaborate their message and lend visual beauty to their writing. Similar patterns can be found in the architecture of mosques, Muslim places of worship. Architects and artists incorporate intricate patterns and repeating geometric designs instead of sculptural and figural programs. These highly elaborate designs came to be known as *arabesques*. The elaboration of line, pattern, and shape remains an important motif in Islamic art.



Example of arabesque design

- Who is Muhammad?
 - Muhammad was born in 570 CE (after the year 0) in Mecca in what is now Saudi Arabia. Working as a shepherd and a merchant, he grew dissatisfied with the superstitions and social injustices of his community. The people of Mecca worshipped many gods and had lost touch with the tradition of the prophet Abraham and the command to worship one god.

Muhammad enjoyed praying and meditating in the mountains around Mecca. When Muhammad was about 40 years old, the angel Jibril (also known as Gabriel) appeared and revealed to him the word of God, which was eventually collected in the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam. Muhammad continued to receive messages from God and began to preach what God revealed to him. Islam means many things, generally including notions of surrender, submission, commitment, and peace. Emphasizing belief in the one true god, known in Arabic as "Allah," Muhammad taught his followers to lead peaceful, virtuous lives through submission to the divine will.

- Why didn't the artist make a figural portrait of Muhammad?
 - Although the Qur'an does not expressly forbid Muslims from making images, Muslims artists do not traditionally depict Muhammad. When he is pictured, his face is often obscured by a veil. There is a belief that any representation would pale in comparison to the beauty of Allah's true creations. The hilye, or calligraphic portrait, gives Muslim artists a non-figural alternative for representing and venerating the prophet. A hilye is a written portrait; it describes the prophet Muhammad in elaborate, ornamental script.
- What is written on the hilye?
 - The top panel is called the *bas makam* and contains the *bismallah*: "In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate." The center circle, called the belly, contains Muhammad's name and a physical description of the Prophet. In smaller circles around the belly appear the names of the four caliphs, or leaders of Islam, after Muhammad. From the top left moving clockwise are the names of Omar, Abu Bakr, Othman, and Ali. The area below the circles is known as the skirt. The first rectangle reads, "We did not send you except as a mercy to all the worlds." The next rectangle says, "He (Muhammad) is sealing the prophecy and is the seal of the prophets." The writing in the third rectangle is a statement of praise and reads: "If not you, if not you, then what would change without you?"
 - Because the word of God is so central to the Islamic faith, the emphasis on writing and word-sounds plays an important role in the tradition, and the hilye remains a vital mode of representation.
- Where would you find a hilye? What were they used for?
 - Hilyes can be found in private homes and in schools. They are art objects, appreciated for their beauty as much as for their spiritual significance. The word and verbal sounds play an important role in Islam. The Qur'an is the word of Allah revealed to the prophet Muhammad. The words themselves are holy. Writing and recitation resonate with deep spirituality. Because Muslims believe that figural representation can only poorly imitate the beauty of Allah's works, writing supersedes the image. Contemplation of words and writing, memorization and recitation of text, and calligraphy became important ways of bringing the individual closer to God.

Activity

1. Have the students examine the calligraphy closely and consider the way the lines form words as well as a distinct visual impression.
2. Using pens or markers on heavyweight textured paper, the students will make a written portrait of someone who is important to them.
3. The students should write the individual's name along with a physical description and include words and phrases relevant to that individual. They should mimic the format of the hilye (with a top panel, the center circle [called the belly], which contains the person's name and a physical description, the skirt, and smaller



circles with the name of people important to the person depicted). Make sure the students keep in mind the visual quality of their writing.

4. Have the students decorate their written portraits with oil pastels or crayons. They should try to use patterns and lines that complement the writing and promote visual harmony. Ask the students to think about how the colors and patterns can contribute to the meaning of portrait.

Expanding the Lesson

- Analyzing the visual differences of the words and letters they have in common, the students should compare their written portraits. Have the students reflect on the different ways their words create meaning and how writing about an individual forces the writer to think about and appreciate that person.

Vocabulary

Allah: the name of God in Islam.

arabesque: elaborate patterns that comprise repeated geometric designs; often used in mosque architecture.

hilye: a calligraphic portrait, using writing rather than figures to represent Muhammad.

Islam: a religion practiced by 1.3 billion people living in Asia, Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, and North America; they believe that Muhammad is the prophet; the word in Arabic means surrender, submission, commitment, and peace.

mosque: Muslim place of worship.

prophet: person who delivers a message from God.

Qur'an: the holy book of Islam; Muslims consider the Qur'an to be the literal word of Allah as it was revealed to Muhammad.

Illinois Learning Standards

English Language Arts

3 – Writing

4 – Listening and Speaking

Social Science

16 – History

17 – Geography

18 – Social Systems

Fine Arts

26 – Creating and Performing

27 – Arts and Civilization

Foreign Languages

29 – Culture and Geography