Most of us have encountered Islamic art in one form or another. Oriental rugs, white ceramic dishware decorated in cobalt blue, and buildings with horseshoe-shaped arches can be found throughout the United States and around the world, and are vaguely understood to be “Islamic” in some way. But what makes a work of art “Islamic”?

Islam is a way of life as well as a religion, and it has given rise to distinctive cultural and artistic idioms reflected widely across Muslim societies. The phrase “Islamic Art” includes works of art created for religious purposes, such as an illuminated Qur’an, a mosque, or a prayer rug. But it also refers to objects that serve secular purposes in lands historically ruled by Muslims, which might include the ornate ceramic tiles on the walls of a sultan's palace or the architectural features of the humblest Muslim home. Eclectic and innovative, Islamic art has benefited from the willingness of Muslim artists to adopt new ideas, materials, and techniques from many sources. This receptivity to the new was encouraged by the pilgrimages to distant holy places and international trade and travel that have been and continue to be important in the lives of many Muslims. Islamic art has also been enriched by the contributions of non-Muslims who at times enjoyed protected status under Islam and participated in the culturally diverse societies exemplified by Baghdad, Cairo, and Cordoba, centers of art and learning where religious minorities, as well as newly conquered ethnic groups, could become full contributors to society.

And yet, the arts of the Muslim world are distinctive and visibly different from Western arts. In mosques, tombs, Qur’ans and other works of art that have an explicitly religious purpose, Islam shuns human and animal figures because they might be mistaken for divine effigies or idols. Instead, artists created a lively ornamental tradition that features crisp geometric and swirling vegetal patterns. Meaning is communicated by calligraphy—the most esteemed of art forms—inscribed in Qur’anic manuscripts, emblazoned on the walls of buildings, and even woven into textiles.

The Islamic Art Spots are seven visual essays, presented in a series of short films which can be viewed in any order. Together they provide access to the art of Muslim societies through their exploration of seven key topics:

- **Calligraphy.** Regarded as the highest expression of Islamic art, calligraphy appears in manuscripts, on objects of both sacred and secular use, and in proclamations on the walls of buildings.
- **Mosques and Religious Architecture.** Diverse in both architecture and function, mosques and other religious buildings are places both large and small, designed for both solitary prayer and public gatherings.
- **The Arts of Trade and Travel.** The obligation to make the pilgrimage (known as the hajj) to Mecca, combined with the Islamic world's tradition of global trade, makes international travel important in the lives of many Muslims.
Islamic Gardens. In the often-daunting natural environment of the Middle East and other regions of the Islamic world, gardens are sanctuaries of pleasure, reflections of the paradise promised to the faithful, and symbols of humankind’s place on earth.

Islamic Textiles. Whether used as floor coverings or luxurious ceremonial robes, textiles ensure that treasured art plays a part in Muslims’ daily lives.

Geometry. The lines and curves of geometry not only provide the basis of ornamental design in Islamic art; they also characterize the timeless, breathtaking architecture of the Muslim world.

The Arts of the Book and Miniature Painting. Made first on parchment and later on paper, illuminated manuscripts and miniature paintings have lively scenes that provide fascinating windows onto the Muslim world of the past.

The Islamic Art Spots are part of the Bridging Cultures Bookshelf: Muslim Journeys collection. They can be viewed as a group by individuals or screened as part of public programming on Islamic arts. No prior knowledge of Islamic art and culture is required to enjoy and learn from these films.

Each Art Spot can be paired with one or more of the books on the Bookshelf. That is why you will find individual Art Spots listed among the “Related Resources” for many of the books. By viewing the recommended Art Spots in connection with the specific books, you will begin to see how fully the arts are integrated into all phases of life in the Muslim world. In addition to the volumes on the Bookshelf, the Muslim Journeys Bookshelf webpage also provides a selection of primary sources where you can read about places, buildings, and practices in the words of the people of that same time in history.