



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
COLLEGE OF SOCIAL & BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES

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ISLAMIC INFLUENCES IN THE RENAISSANCE

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Lessons overview

The Italian Renaissance, as the French term *renaissance* suggests, is the rebirth of ancient Greek and Roman knowledge and forms. This idea of the Renaissance doesn't present the whole picture, though. Often, the Italian Renaissance and the Renaissance's effect on Europe is presented as if they were solely the result of the Italian city-states and their scholars, artists, and patrons' efforts. What this characterization omits is that the ancient knowledge coveted by Italians and the desire for learning that drove the Renaissance was denied and repressed by Middle Age Europe. Fortunately, the centers of learning in Islam preserved this ancient knowledge and, through active investigation and discovery built upon this knowledge. Without Islam's conservation of Classical texts and its use of scientific investigation to advance knowledge in a wide range of disciplines, the Italian Renaissance may not have happened. Additionally, while the influence of Islam was widely recognized during the Renaissance, it was also actively repressed by that most influential group of the Renaissance, the humanists.¹

The suppression of Islamic influence on this most important of Western cultural formations continues today. These lessons attempt to inject a new understanding and appreciation of Islam's effects on the Western Renaissance by enumerating the kinds of knowledge Islam transferred to the West and the paths of that transfer. Specific instances of Islamic ideas and forms that influenced Renaissance visual experience will be presented in textiles and Renaissance paintings.

Learning objectives

1. Recall that the Italian Renaissance was heavily influenced by, if not the result of, Islam's preservation of ancient knowledge, the discoveries of Muslim scientists and thinkers, and Islam's spirit of scientific investigation.

¹ "From Baghdad to Barcelona."

2. Recall specific forms and ideas that were transferred from Islam to the Italian Renaissance: textiles and calligraphy as decoration, optical sciences for linear perspective, aesthetics of order and harmony.
3. Identify the regions of influence: Europe, Andalusia, Northern Africa, Sicily, Venice
4. Recall the kinds of knowledge that was transferred and how the knowledge was transferred: Aristotelian philosophy, Euclidean geometry, Ptolemaic astronomy, and Galenic medicine
5. Identify Oriental carpets and pseudo-Arabic script in Italian paintings
6. Recall aesthetic principles shared by Islam and the Italian Renaissance: proportion, geometrization of space (perspective),
7. Explain how Italian Renaissance artworks illustrate the aesthetic principles of Islam

Learning materials

1. Reading: [“How Islam influenced the European Renaissance”](#)²
2. Reading: [“Rediscovering Arabic Science, Richard Covington”](#)³
3. Reading: [The West Owes a Debt to Islam: Interview with Professor Glen Cooper](#)
4. Reading: [“Calligraphy in Islamic Art”](#), Metropolitan Museum of Art, Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History
5. Reading: [“Islamic Carpets in European Paintings,”](#) Metropolitan Museum of Art, Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History
6. Reading: [Webpage on Kufic calligraphy](#), Calligraphy and Qalam: An Introduction to Arabic, Ottoman, and Persian Calligraphy.
7. Film: *East Meets West: Islam and the Renaissance*
8. Film: *The Moors: Prelude to the Renaissance*, various segments, in Films on Demand
9. Lecture: Overview of Islam and the Italian Renaissance
10. Lecture: Islamic ornament and the Italian Renaissance
11. Lecture: Islamic optics and Italian Renaissance representation

Learning activities

1. Hot spot activity: Identify Oriental carpets in Italian Renaissance paintings
2. Geography activity: Identify the geographical locations that were the source and destination for Islamic influence
3. Linear perspective activity: Create an example of linear perspective using a vanishing point and orthogonals
4. Learning quizzes: Series of brief quizzes that ask students to recall ideas and terms from the learning materials

² “How Islam Influenced the European Renaissance.”

³ Covington, “Saudi Aramco World : Rediscovering Arabic Science.”

Works Cited

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