
CONTENT AREA 7

West and Central Asia

500 B.C.E.–1980 C.E.

ENDURING UNDERSTANDING 7-1. *The arts of West and Central Asia play a key role in the history of world art, giving form to the vast cultural interchanges that have occurred in these lands that link the European and Asian peoples.*

- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 7-1a.** Historical cultures of West and Central Asia reside in a vast area that includes the Arabian Peninsula and the Levant, Anatolia, Greater Iran, Central Asia, Inner Asia, and Himalayan Asia. These regions have had shifting political boundaries throughout their histories and include lands associated with the former Soviet Union and modern China. They form the heart of the ancient Silk Route that connected the Greco–Roman world with China and India.
- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 7-1b.** Arts attest to the transmission and influence of cultural ideas, such as Islam and Buddhism, and cultural art forms, such as Hellenistic architecture, Buddhist sculpture, chinoiserie (in Persian art), and ceramic-tile decoration. Cross-cultural comparisons with the arts of these regions may be made most readily to the arts of the ancient Mediterranean, medieval Europe, and South, East, and Southeast Asia.
- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 7-1c.** West Asia is the cradle of arts produced in regions with a dominant Islamic culture. These arts may be religious or secular in nature, and may or may not have been made by or for Muslims. The term “Islamic Art” may be applied to these diverse art forms. Many examples of Islamic art from across the traditional Islamic lands share similarities in terms of their content and visual characteristics.
- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 7-1d.** The arts of West and Central Asia were created for and acquired by various kinds of local and global patrons. Audiences for these works included royal and wealthy patrons, lay and monastic religious practitioners, and foreign collectors who acquired works through gift or trade.
- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 7-1e.** The arts of West and Central Asia had great international impact through trade. Textiles were perhaps the most important art form in these regions and dominated much of the international trade between Europe and Asia. Islamic metalworks, including examples with Christian subject matter, were created for trade in the regions bordering the Mediterranean. Ceramics were another important trade item, particularly the iznik wares created in Turkey.

ENDURING UNDERSTANDING 7-2. *The religious arts of West and Central Asia are united by the traditions of the region: Buddhism and Islam.*

- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 7-2a.** Cultures of these regions are diverse, but they were united through their shared beliefs and practices, particularly the world religions of Buddhism, which originated in the sixth century B.C.E. in South Asia, and Islam, which originated in the seventh century C.E. in West Asia.

- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 7-2b.** Architecture in West and Central Asia is frequently religious in function. West and Central Asia is home to many important Islamic mosques, which are decorated with nonfigural imagery, including calligraphy and vegetal forms. All mosques have a Qibla wall, which faces the direction of Mecca, home of the Kaaba. This wall is ornamented with an empty Mihrab niche, serving as a focus for prayer. A large congregational mosque may also include a Minbar (pulpit for the imam), as well as a Minaret and a central courtyard to call and accommodate practitioners for prayer. Other important forms of Islamic religious architecture include commemorative monuments, such as the Kaaba and the Dome of the Rock, and tomb architecture. Central Asia is further recognized for its outstanding Buddhist cave architecture, which incorporates relief carving, constructive sculpture, and wall painting. In the Tibetan lands, Buddhist architecture flourishes in the form of stupas and monastic architecture.
- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 7-2c.** Pilgrimage is an important religious practice in Islam and Buddhism and is a key focus of several monuments and artworks in West and Central Asia including the following: the Kaaba, the most sacred site in Islam; the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem; and the Buddha sculpture Jowo Rinpoche, considered the most sacred image in Tibet.

ENDURING UNDERSTANDING 7-3. *Use of figural art in religious contexts varies among traditions, whereas figural art is common in secular art forms across West and Central Asia.*

- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 7-3a.** Figural art is a primary form of visual communication in Buddhist communities in Central Asia, as it is across Asia. Figural imagery is used to depict Buddhas and various attendants, teachers, practitioners, and deities. This is an iconic culture, and the presence of invoked figural imagery is important to Buddhist practices. These figures may be venerated in shrine settings, may inhabit conceptual landscapes and palaces of ideal Buddhist worlds, may be found in mandalas, or may be depicted in paintings.
- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 7-3b.** Islamic art that is created for religious purposes does not contain figural imagery. Mosque architecture is decorated with nonfigural imagery, including calligraphy, geometric, and vegetal forms. Manuscripts or objects containing sacred texts may contain calligraphy, illumination, or geometric and vegetal decoration, but should not contain figural imagery.
- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 7-3c.** Figural art is an important subject of Islamic art in West and Central Asia. Islamic cultures draw a clear distinction between sacred and secular contexts, and figural imagery abounds in secular works, such as decorative arts and manuscript painting, which often depict sociological types, such as hunters or courtiers, or narrative subjects, such as the ancient kings and heroes of the Persian *Shahnama*. Religious ideas or content are sometimes carried over into secular art forms and may be illustrated when they become the subject of courtly or popular literature and poetry. For example, the prophet Moses might be illustrated in a manuscript of the *Khamsa of Nizami*. He would not be illustrated, however, in a manuscript of the holy Qur'an.

ENDURING UNDERSTANDING 7-4. *Artists of West and Central Asia excelled in the creation of particular art forms exhibiting key characteristics unique to their regions and cultures. Important forms include ceramics, metalwork, textiles, painting, and calligraphy.*

- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 7-4a.** Styles of art from West Asia tend to favor two-dimensional design. These works are often highly decorative, employing geometric and organic forms and vegetal designs, qualities that carry over into figural works, where figures inhabit flat or shallow spaces with tipped perspectives and patterned landscapes. West Asian art finds its greatest source of refinement and international influence in the Persianate arts from the Timurid and Safavid Dynasties of Iran, which influenced the Ottoman arts of Turkey and the Mughal arts of India. Styles of art in Central Asia can be divided into Persianate Islamic styles, which maintain developments made in West Asian art, and Indian-inspired styles, which are characterized by the idealized figural art traditions of South Asia.
- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 7-4b.** Ceramic arts have flourished in West Asia since the prehistoric era, and many technical advancements in this media, such as the development of lusterware and cobalt-on-white slip painting, developed here. Ceramic arts were used to create utilitarian vessels and elaborate painted and mosaic-tile architectural decoration, carrying forward artistic practices explored in ancient West Asia (the Near East). Highpoints in West and Central Asian ceramics include Persian mosaic-tile architecture from the Seljuk through the Safavid Dynasties, as seen in the Great Mosque of Isfahan, and Iznik tile work and export ceramics created during the Ottoman Dynasty.
- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 7-4c.** Metalwork and metallurgy flourished in West and Central Asia in the creation of metal plaques, vessels, arms, armor and tack, sculpture, and decorative objects of all kinds. Islamic metalwork is widely regarded as one of the finest decorative art forms of the medieval world. Metal sculpture was an important art form in Central Asian and Himalayan Buddhist art, which created Buddhist figures in bronze, copper, brass and silver, and often ornamented them with gilding, metal inlay, and paint. Metal artworks were created through various processes including casting, beating, chasing, inlaying, and embossing.
- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 7-4d.** Textile forms from this region include silk-tapestry weaving, silk velvets, and wool and silk carpets.
- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 7-4e.** Painting in West and Central Asia usually took three forms: wall painting, manuscript painting, and in the Himalayan regions, the painting of thangkas (large paintings on cloth) of Buddhist deities and mandalas. Calligraphy was a prominent art form, particularly in Islamic art in West Asia where beautiful forms were created to transmit sacred texts. Calligraphy is found on architecture, decorative arts objects, and ceramic tiles, as well as in manuscripts written on paper, cloth, or vellum.

Image Set

181. Petra, Jordan: Treasury and Great Temple. Nabataean Ptolemaic and Roman.
c. 400 B.C.E.–100 C.E. Cut rock. (3 images)



Petra

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Treasury

© Bernard Gagnon



Great Temple

© Bernard Gagnon

182. Buddha. Bamiyan, Afghanistan. Gandharan. c. 400–800 C.E. (destroyed in 2001). Cut rock with plaster and polychrome paint. (2 images)



Buddha
© Borromeo/Art Resource, NY



Buddha
© Paul Almasy/Corbis

183. The Kaaba. Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Islamic. Pre-Islamic monument; rededicated by Muhammad in 631–632 C.E.; multiple renovations. Granite masonry, covered with silk curtain and calligraphy in gold and silver-wrapped thread. (3 images)



The Kaaba
© ALI JAREKJI/Reuters/Corbis



The Kaaba
© Kazuyoshi Nomachi/Corbis

The Kaaba, continued



Gathering at the Kaaba

© ALI JAREKJI/Reuters/Corbis

184. Jowo Rinpoche, enshrined in the Jokhang Temple. Lhasa, Tibet. Yarlung Dynasty. Believed to have been brought to Tibet in 641 C.E. Gilt metals with semiprecious stones, pearls, and paint; various offerings.



Jowo Rinpoche

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185. Dome of the Rock. Jerusalem. Islamic, Umayyad. 691–692 C.E., with multiple renovations. Stone masonry and wooden roof decorated with glazed ceramic tile, mosaics, and gilt aluminum and bronze dome. (2 images)



Dome of the Rock

© SEF/Art Resource, NY



Dome of the Rock

© Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

186. Great Mosque (Masjid-e Jameh). Isfahan, Iran. Islamic, Persian: Seljuk, Il-Khanid, Timurid and Safavid Dynasties. c. 700 C.E.; additions and restorations in the 14th, 18th, and 20th centuries C.E. Stone, brick, wood, plaster, and glazed ceramic tile. (4 images)



Masjid-e Jameh
© Bruno Morandi/Hemis/Corbis



Detail
© EmmePi Travel/Alamy



Courtyard
© Paule Seux/Hemis/Corbis



Mihrab (prayer room)
© Gianni Dagli Orti/The Art Archive at Art Resource, NY

187. Folio from a Qur'an. Arab, North Africa, or Near East. Abbasid. c. eighth to ninth century C.E. Ink, color, and gold on parchment.



Folio from a Qur'an

© The Pierpont Morgan Library/Art Resource, NY

188. Basin (*Baptistère de St. Louis*). Muhammad ibn al-Zain. c. 1320–1340 C.E. Brass inlaid with gold and silver.



Basin (*Baptistère de St. Louis*)

© Gianni Dagli Orti/The Archive at Art Resource, NY

189. *Bahram Gur Fights the Karg*, folio from the Great Il-Khanid *Shahnama*. Islamic; Persian, Il'Khanid. c. 1330–1340 C.E. Ink and opaque watercolor, gold, and silver on paper.



Bahram Gur Fights the Karg

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190. *The Court of Gayumars*, folio from Shah Tahmasp's *Shahnama*. Sultan Muhammad. c. 1522–1525 C.E. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper.



The Court of Gayumars

Courtesy of Wikimedia

191. The Ardabil Carpet. Maqsud of Kashan. 1539–1540 C.E. Silk and wool.



The Ardabil Carpet

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