

Chapter 7 – Looking Eastward

(Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, 16th Ed., and supplementary material)

This is a chapter commentary which is the "script" for a lecture I recorded in audio file form. This summary includes coverage of the illustrations in a chapter of the 16th edition of the text ***The Story of Art*** by E.H. Gombrich as well as additional illustrations included in the slide set made available at www.ambriana.com at the **Visual Technology Workbook** button. This material is intended to supplement the reading of the text as assigned coursework. This is not a replacement for your reading of the full textbook chapter, which contains many facts and details not covered here.

This chapter focuses on art in the Islamic world and art in China, and how it was affected by the religions and cultures of these areas. Of particular interest are 1) the technologies used by craftsmen and artists, 2) the purposes of artworks created by a culture, 3) the rules and constraints of each culture affecting the creation of artworks, and 4) the status of the craftsmen or artists creating the works.

Islam was founded by **Muhammad** in the 600's AD and as Gombrich states, "Muhammad directed the mind of the artist away from objects of the real world to the dream-world of lines and colors" (p. 143). The painting of images was prohibited, so artists turned to patterns, forms, and lacework ornamentation known as "arabesques." Since Islam does not have a hierarchy of saints or apostles standing between man and God, and no universal spiritual leader such as a pope, no images of people were relevant to the religion to commemorate in pictures. So unlike the decoration of Christian churches, the decoration of the mosque (the Islamic house of worship) did not include images of people, but instead relied on **geometric patterns** and the use of **Arabic script** (calligraphy). In later times Muslims in Persia did create pictures and artwork including images of people in literary works, but never in a religious context.

In China, Gombrich states that "the impact of religion on art was even stronger" than in the middle east (p. 147). The eastern philosophies of Buddhism and Taoism, where one comes to terms with nature, and one's own nature, led to the creation of artworks for the purpose of meditation. A regard for the creators of these artworks as intellectuals, as "visual poets", rather than craftsmen, was different than the way in which the creators of artworks were looked upon in Europe and the middle east until the Renaissance.

Slide 03 (not in textbook) – summary of historical facts

Muhammad said that it was not possible to picture God (Allah), and the Islamic religion does not include apostles, disciples, saints, or religious authority figures as objects of veneration or worship. The Qur'an (Koran) does not include stories of the type that exist in the bible, holy events are not to be illustrated. Mosques are not decorated with images of people or other living things. Instead, geometric patterns, including patterns formed by flowing Arabic script, are used as decoration.

Slide 04 (not in textbook) – the Ka'bah in Mecca surrounded by pilgrims

One of the **five pillars of the Muslim faith** is a **pilgrimage** to Mecca, to visit and seven times walk around the Ka'bah, a square building in the center of a large open space. Here you see hundreds of thousands of Muslims praying at the Ka'bah during a religious service.

Slides 05 and 06, Figure 90, p. 144 – The Alhambra

The Alhambra, a palace in Granada, Spain, is lavishly decorated with geometric patterns. Spain was conquered by the Muslims in the Middle Ages and held until 1492, when Spain forcibly expelled the Muslims and the Jews and initiated the Spanish Inquisition which investigated and terrorized many who claimed they had converted to Christianity.

Slide 07 (not in textbook) – decorated mosque minaret in Paris, France

This mosque in Paris, built in 1925, has a geometric pattern decoration on the tower (minaret) formed with colored tiles. Minarets such as these are used by a mosque attendant known as the muezzin to call the Islamic faithful to prayer five times a day.

Slides 08 and 09 (not in textbook) – decorated mihrab (prayer alcove)

This is a mihrab, a prayer alcove in a mosque. Notice the intricate geometric patterns used to decorate the arch and walls.

Slide 10 (not in textbook) – Jerusalem, Temple Mount, looking north

Jerusalem is a holy city for all three major monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It was held by Jews until 70 AD, when the Romans destroyed it and the Jewish temple which had occupied the large walled flat area (the temple mount) at the upper right corner of this picture. The area was conquered by the Muslims in the 600's AD. The blue building now sitting on the temple mount is the Dome of the Rock, at the same location as the Jewish temple, and covering the rock from which Muhammad is said to have risen to heaven. The Dome of the Rock was constructed in the late 600's AD.

Slides 11-13 (not in textbook) – Jerusalem, Temple Mount, looking west

These slides show you progressively closer images of the Dome of the Rock, which, like mosques, is decorated only with geometric designs and Arabic script.

Slide 14 (not in textbook) – The Dome of the Rock

The four pictures here show you the interior of the Dome of the Rock, its decorations, use of arches and Corinthian columns, and the rock it covers.

Slide 15 (not in textbook) – Arabic script for Allah

Arabic script for the name of God (Allah) and the prophet Muhammad is very often used in mosque decoration. This is Arabic script for "Allah."

Slide 16 (not in textbook) – Arabic script for Allah and Muhammad

Arabic script for Allah and Muhammad is very often used in mosque decoration. Here you see the two names, with the name of Allah shown first, since Arabic reads from right to left.

Slide 17 (not in textbook) – Tile decoration with the name of Allah

Based on the prior slides you should be able to identify the name of Allah in this decorated tile.

Slide 18 (not in textbook) – Calligraphic variations in Arabic script

The Shahada is a special prayer repeated by Muslims. It is said that if a person says this prayer with a sincere heart, he declares himself to be a Muslim, and irreversible action. In both versions of the script the name of Muhammed is placed directly under the name Allah in the center of the text. The bottom version is a more traditional form of script, while the top version is a very stylized adaptation of the shape of the script in a modern form.

Slide 19 (not in textbook) – Illuminated Islamic manuscript

Many variations of names exist for Allah. In ancient cultures the power to name something meant a special connection with it. This slide shows two pages from a very fancy hand-copied book (manuscript) with some of the many names for Allah, decorated with gold leaf and colorful ornamentation. These are called “illuminated manuscripts” and were common in many religious cultures, including Christianity. Several of the illustrations in the *Story of Art* are from illuminated manuscripts. Since books are usually stored closed, the pages are protected from sunlight and weather in a way that pictures hanging on walls are not.

Slide 20 (not in textbook) – Highly decorated illuminated manuscript

This additional example of an illuminated Islamic manuscript is even more ornate than the earlier example, and decorations in gold and other colors dominate each page.

Slide 21 (not in textbook) – Picture with Muhammad with veiled face

Muhammad (571-632 AD) was an Arabian religious and political leader whom Muslims believe to be the last prophet of God. Believed to be a descendent of Ishmael, a son of Abraham, he is considered the most important person in the religion of Islam. Muhammad is shown arriving in Medina in 622 AD, an event named the *Hegira* or *Hijra*. He and his followers were welcomed in Medina after they left Mecca. It would be considered disrespectful by many Muslims to presume to draw Muhammad’s face, which is why a white veil is drawn here covering it. The color green has a special significance to Muslims, much like purple (and later blue or red) to Christians; this is why Muhammad is the only figure in the foreground shown clothed in it.

Slide 22, Figure 92, p. 146 – Persian Manuscript Illumination

A miniature painting, decorating an illuminated manuscript, showing a night-time scene in a garden. The scene is fairy tale-like; the brilliant colors lit by moonlight are intended to give the eye much pleasure visually wandering around in the garden, setting the mood for the romantic meeting of a prince and a princess. This is an example of Persian (Iranian) literature, which permitted picturing people in non-religious contexts.

Slide 23, Figure 91, p. 145 – A Persian Carpet

Persian carpets such as the one shown here are composed of wool dyed with natural plant dyes, tied in short strings to a fabric backing. The colors and patterns are distinctive to various regions in Persia and Afghanistan. A carpet such as this is made entirely by hand, and takes months to make. Carpets such as

these sell for thousands of dollars and can last for centuries. The geometric designs and patterns in these carpets are original to the carpet weavers.

Slide 24 (not in textbook) – Arabic calligraphic decoration

This decoration, a sentence honoring Allah, illustrates how flowing script lends itself to ornamentation. Based on the prior slides you should be able to identify the name of Allah expressed in Arabic in the most prominent location in the circle.

Slide 25 (not in textbook) – summary of historical facts

Gombrich shifts his focus from the middle east to China at this point. Remains from Chinese culture exist roughly in parallel from the time of the building of the great pyramids of Egypt, but these two cultures probably had no knowledge of each other. The Chinese had a written language as early as 1000 BC, while the oldest known written language of the middle east predates it by about two millennium. Chinese culture flourish in the ancient period during periods of consolidation of the nation by 221 BC. The philosophies of Buddha, Confucius, and Taoism have a great bearing on Chinese culture and art.

Slide 26 (not in textbook) – map of China

This slide shows you the vast size of China, which dominates the Asian land mass and greatly exceeds the size of Korea (upper right) and the islands of Japan (not shown on this map, but roughly the size of the Korean peninsula).

Slide 27, Figure 93, p. 147 – Chinese Tomb Relief (carving)

The carving shown in this slide served a purpose similar to Egyptian tomb art, in picturing scenes in the life of the person buried in the tomb. It may have been entirely decorative, however, and not drawn with the purpose of providing a place for the soul of the deceased person to occupy in an afterlife. Gombrich draws attention to the fact that the style of this art was more based on curves and circular shapes than the straight lines of Egyptian art. It would be incorrect to think that Chinese artists inherited any artistic concepts from the Egyptians or Greeks, because these civilizations had little or no contact in ancient times.

Slide 28, Figure 94, p. 148 – Stone figure, winged beast

This Chinese stone carving from the early middle ages (bear in mind that this term for a time period actually has significance only in a European context) develops the massive force of a beast through the use of graceful circular shapes.

Slide 29, Figure 94, p. 148 – Silk scroll telling a story

Much Chinese art tells a story or depicts a scene in which action is implied by flowing lines and facial expressions. In this moralistic scene, a husband is (wrongly, it seems) criticizing his wife for something she has not done.

Slide 30, Figure 95, p. 151 – Head of a Lohan

16 or 18 Lohans (depending on the specific sect of Buddhism), or disciples of Buddha, are present in Buddhist temples. This example of a ceramic bust of a Lohan, we see the same emphasis on realism, and not idealized beauty, typical of Roman statuary of emperors (but China did not inherit this influence from Rome,

because there was little or no contact between these civilizations). Make sure you read the web link for the topic of Lohans at the www.ambriana.web site for Unit 4.

Slide 31, Figure 97, p. 152 – Chinese scroll, landscape in moonlight

Landscapes such as this were created by Chinese artists not for decoration, but as object for meditation. The scenes were built up by artists from “standard” and accepted ways to depict various elements, such as mountains, clouds, trees, limbs, leaves, bamboo, and rocks. Artworks such as this were kept in tubes and only removed for viewing when the owner was meditating, focusing on thoughts brought to mind by the scene.

Slide 32, Figure 98, p. 153 – Chinese scroll, landscape after rain

Ink-on-silk drawings such as this one were created by artists who were revered much like poets. In fact, the artist often composed and wrote a poem on the painting as seen here. China was unique among the civilizations we study in the period of the middle ages, for considering the people who created artworks such as this as intellectuals rather than craftsmen or tradespeople. They felt that by working in concepts and providing objects for meditation, the people who created these artworks were “authors” working in a visual medium instead of words. In Europe and the middle east, by contrast, the creators of paintings, carvings, castings, and stained glass windows were considered like carpenters, shoemakers, and tailors, in that they worked with their hands (and got them dirty) rather than working with their minds and words and documents.

Slide 33, Figure 99, p. 154 – Chinese scroll, three fishes

This meditative drawing is distinct in several ways. The artist has not arranged the fishes in a symmetric way, but the work looks balanced and eye-pleasing anyway. The motion of the fishes is marvelously captured with lifelike curves, and the effect of light and shading on the circular body of each fish gives each a three-dimensional sense. This effect, one of the five types of perspective techniques, is known as *chiaroscuro* in Renaissance art and was only understood and employed by European artists hundreds of years later.

Slide 34, Figure 100, p. 155 – Boy painting

This Chinese woodblock print (printed from a carved piece of flat wood) shows an artist as he might work while painting one of the scrolls illustrated in the three previous slides.

Slide 35, end of slides for Chapter 7