

Design a Calligraphic Plate

Did you know that for centuries throughout West Asia, people have been decorating household items such as lamps, vases, bowls, and plates with calligraphy? Arabic script developed rapidly after the rise of Islam into not only a writing system but also an art form. Since the revelation from God to the prophet Muhammad—the Qur’an—is in Arabic, its script gives visible form to the divine beauty of God’s words. Eventually, Arabic and Persian calligraphy came to be used not only in religious contexts but also in secular writing such as poetry, aphorisms, and praise for rulers. Many of the West Asian ceramics in the Asian Art Museum’s collection have inscriptions with proverbs that encourage good behavior or offer blessings.

Take a look at the bowl and plate images here and notice the inscriptions: one is in the middle of the dish, another goes around the rim, while yet another is repeated throughout the basin to create a pattern. Read the provided translations; what are the inscriptions about? What might the inscription reveal about the person who owned the dish?

In this activity, you will decorate a paper plate with a meaningful word in Arabic script surrounded by images inspired by that word.



Inscription: “Take the middle road in [your] affairs; indeed it is a Salvation. Don’t ride a too gentle mount or a too obstinate one.”



A single inscription, the Arabic phrase *al-baraka* (“blessings”), covers most of this bowl’s interior. The inscription, while still readable, was exaggerated for the sake of overall design and shows the trend toward abstracting script that is a key feature of Islamic design and artwork. The lines of Kufic script mimic the woven pattern of a basket.



Inscription: “Gift of his Excellency Nawab Amjad ad-daulah Hashmat ad-daulah on whom [...] AH 1295/1878 CE.” (Note that the inscription is upside down relative to the landscape.)

Images from top to bottom: Bowl with Arabic inscription, approx. 900–1000. Northeastern Iran, Samanid period (819–1005). Earthenware with slip decoration under clear glaze. *Asian Art Museum, The Avery Brundage Collection, B60P1862*. Bowl, approx. 900–1100. Northeastern Iran or Turkmenistan or Uzbekistan. Earthenware with underglaze slip decoration. *Asian Art Museum, The Avery Brundage Collection, B60P1837*. Plate with architectural design and inscriptions, approx. 1850–1900. Iran, Qajar period (1794–1925). Fritware; blue and white underglaze painted decoration. *Asian Art Museum, Gift of M. Larry Ottis, M.D., F2009.17.16*. Photographs © Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.

DURATION

45 minutes–1 hour

MATERIALS

- Paper plate or rounded cardboard to draw on
- Something to draw with: markers, colored pencils, crayons, paint
- A cup to trace a circle with, about 3 or 4 inches in diameter
- Spare paper to practice Arabic script
- Link to website tutorial: [Stanford Arabic Alphabet Chart](#)

PROCEDURE

- 1 Choose one of the Arabic words depicted here: *marah* (fun), *amal* (hope), *salam* (peace), *hubb* (love), *qalb* (heart), *farah* (joy). What are the images that come to mind when you think of your chosen word? They could be of your family and friends or of a favorite place, animal, food, plant, hobby, etc.
- 2 In the middle of your plate or cardboard, use a cup to trace a circle about 3-4 inches in diameter.
- 3 Draw your important images around the circle you traced, filling in empty space with abstract designs and color.

fun	مرح <i>marah</i>
hope	أمل <i>amal</i>
peace	سلام <i>salam</i>
love	حب <i>hubb</i>
heart	قلب <i>qalb</i>
joy	فرح <i>farah</i>



④ Once you are finished drawing, open up the link to the Stanford Arabic Alphabet Chart and find the letters that make up your chosen word. Note: In Arabic you write words from right to left. Make sure to look closely and find the small arrows on each letter that indicate in which direction to make each stroke.

⑤ Using the chart, practice writing your word on a separate piece of paper until you feel confident enough to write it on your plate.

If you want to go further, try clicking on a letter and learn how it's pronounced.

⑥ Write your word in the small circle on your plate.

You can now use your plate to decorate part of your home! Use it as a centerpiece on a table, set it facing out on a shelf, or hang it on a wall. Enjoy telling visitors about your plate!

