

Educator Guide

FEATURED WORK OF ART



HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

This resource includes factual information, cultural context, glossary of terms, and prompts and discussion questions related to the *Qur'ān in Two Volumes with Leather Pouches*, W.853.

This resource is recommended for High School audiences and Visual Arts subjects. Students will analyze the impact of the historic and religious context on the creation of this devotional object. These suggestions were informed by the Maryland State Department of Education 2024 standards.

[Qur'ān in Two Volumes with Leather Pouches](#)

Unidentified artist

West Africa, 19th Century

Ink and paint on paper bound between loose boards, leather satchel lined with discarded Qur'an folios

Museum purchase with funds provided by the Islamic Acquisition Fund, 2000, acc. no. W.853

BACKGROUND CONTEXT

Facts About the Work of Art

- This Qur'ān is split into two volumes, with two leather pouches designed to hold each of the loose-leaf volumes. Each volume of this Qur'ān is approximately 4.5 by 4.5 inches. The small size of this Qur'ān and the leather pouches (*maḥḍar*) containing it suggest that this object is personal and portable. It was likely carried throughout the day as a devotional object. The maḥḍar also allowed the book to be hung on the wall for storage, elevating the sacred text off the floor and protecting it from pests and dust.
- The text is handwritten on square, loose leaves of paper in **Sudani**-style **Maghribi**, an angular Arabic script. This family of script was developed in the **Maghreb** region of northwest Africa. Akin to an artist's practice of revising drawings in a sketchbook, the loose-leaf pages of this object allow this work to be edited, added to, and perfected by the scribe over time.
- The margins of this manuscript are decorated with interlace frames, full-page geometric designs, and circular shapes that mark particular verses and sections in the Qur'ān. The beginning and end of each volume are decorated with geometric designs, patterns, and colors that are reflective of 19th-century West African aesthetics, as well as the book arts style from the city of **Harār**, located in Ethiopia. The similarities to Ethiopian Qur'ān decoration attest to the exchange of visual language and style throughout the African Qur'ānic tradition.

Cultural Context

- Islam came to Africa from the Arabian peninsula during Prophet Muhammad's lifetime in the 7th century as part of the religion's initial expansion. Islam then spread to Egypt and the Maghreb (northwest Africa) regions, before spreading throughout the continent.
- The **Qur'ān** is typically shared orally through manuscripts made by calligraphers and copyists. The act of transcribing and copying the Qur'ān is highly revered and considered an act of devotion.
- Islamic manuscripts created during the 19th century were mainly produced on paper. The paper used in this object is handmade and of exceptional quality; technical tests suggest the paper is likely from Europe.
- The tool used to write calligraphy in Islamic art is called a **qalam**, or reed pen. These tools are commonly made from hollow stems of reed with the end carved and cut to an angle for writing on paper. The materials, shapes, and angles of qalams vary throughout the world, shaping the design and aesthetics of calligraphy across regions.
- There were several centers of **manuscript** production across Africa during the 19th century. The Holy City of Harār in Ethiopia became a major center of Qur'ānic study and Islamic book production. Harār produced manuscripts with a distinctive style of decoration for special volumes of the Qur'ān using ornate frames, illustrations, and patterns.
- New pigments, materials, and **motifs** arose during the 19th century as Harār became increasingly globalized—manuscripts produced at this time began to resemble colors and motifs of West African Qur'āns. The vibrant manuscripts of this region reveal the entanglement of local artists in long-distance circuits of artistic interchange, and they point to the city of Harār as a hub of intersecting routes of trade and pilgrimage.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[National Geographic Mapmaker](#)

[Khamseen: Islamic Art History Online](#)

Related Works of Art

[Qur'an in Two Volumes with Leather Pouches Volume I - Ex Libris](#)

[Qur'an in Two Volumes with Leather Pouches Volume II - Ex Libris](#)

[19th-Century Qur'an - Online Collection](#)

[Tile with the Great Mosque of Mecca](#)

GLOSSARY

Harāḥ: Capital city of eastern Ethiopia, and a major center of Qur'ānic study and manuscript production.

Maghreb: The expanse of this region has changed greatly over time. Today, Maghrib is generally considered northwest Africa including but not limited to Algeria and Morocco.

Maḥḍar: A tightly sealed leather case meant to protect precious volumes from water, dust, and insects.

Manuscript: The handwritten copy of a book.

Motif: Icons, symbols, patterns, or decoration within artwork.

Sudani Maghribi: Angular, cursive style of handwritten alphabet used by the people of the Maghrib (region of northwest Africa).

Qalam: Instrument for calligraphy in Islamic art, often made from the hollow stems of reed and cut to an angle on one end. The qalam holds both symbolic and technical significance, for the act of calligraphy is highly revered in the Islamic faith.

Qur'ān: The sacred scripture of Islam, Arabic for "recitation."

PROMPTS AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. Using the Ex Libris Library to look at [Volume I](#) and [Volume II](#) of this object, pick one page of this manuscript to examine closely for 2–3 minutes. Write down 5 observations.
2. Notice the precision and exceptional handcraft of this object, and consider how it feels to write something by hand. How does the experience of writing by hand differ from typing, texting, or using stamps to write down information?
3. Calligraphy holds an exalted status within the Islamic faith, as do the scribes and copyists who dedicate themselves to mastering the craft. Using a writing instrument of your choice, write your name as beautifully as you can. Then attempt to handwrite an exact copy of this text 4 more times. Reflect on the differences in handwriting with intention and precision as demonstrated in this exercise versus handwriting in your day-to-day life.
4. This object is carried around in a leather pouch to keep it safe and make it easy to transport. Thinking of an object that is important to you, sketch and design a container that you might transport it in.
5. This object is influenced by both West African and Ethiopian aesthetics. Examining the art that you have created, in a short paragraph, identify what communities, cultures, and people have inspired or influenced your artwork.