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Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

Exploring Mosque Architecture in Classroom and Community

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Abstract

This two-part lesson plan provides a classroom introduction to mosque architecture, as well as guidance on leading a mosque site visit to support prior learning. The key architectural components, floor plans, and structural evolution of mosques are introduced using required Advance Placement (AP) Art History mosque examples. Applying their prior understanding of the history and tenets of Islam, students will identify how architectural space supports religious practice in mosques observed both in class and off campus.

Learning Standards

College Board Art History Skills

- **Skill 2** Contextual Analysis: Analyze contextual elements of a work of art, and connect contextual and visual elements of a work of art.
- **Skill 3** Artistic Traditions: Analyze the relationships between a work of art and a related artistic tradition, style, and/or practice.
- **Skill 4** Analysis of Unknown Works: Analyze visual elements of a work of art beyond the image set

Guiding Questions

- How has the *Kabba* influenced mosque design?
- What specific roles do the architectural components of the mosque serve and how do they support Islamic worship?
- How have mosque plans evolved with time and how did historical events and/or regional cultural traditions contribute to these changes?
- How are the mosques highlighted in the AP Art History curriculum similar and/or different from the site visit mosque?

Prior Knowledge

This lesson assumes that you have discussed the basic history and tenets of Islam with your students. Key concepts students should comprehend prior to starting this lesson include:

- The life of the Prophet Muhammed
- The basic tenets of Islam (5 Pillars) - especially *salat* or prayer
- The importance of the *Kabba* in Mecca

Lesson Plan

Lesson Part 1 - Introduction to Islamic Architecture (plans and architectural terms)

Students are introduced to the key vocabulary associated with mosque architecture and mosque floor plans. Content is reinforced through a matching game where students quickly categorize a variety of images under the vocab term that best describes them. The goal of this exercise is to expose students to both the variety and similarities in style and function of architectural forms.

A. Key Vocabulary Applicable to Most Mosque Architecture

- **Masjid**- Mosque in Arabic “place of prostration”
- **Musalla**- sanctuary prayer hall
- **Sahn**- courtyard that often contains a water source for ablutions (ritual washings)
- **Mihrab**- niche in the wall of the mosque that indicates the direction of Mecca
- **Qibla Wall**- wall in which the mihrab is placed (qibla means the direction of Mecca)

- **Minbar**- pulpit in a mosque where the imam gives sermons
- **Ablution Area**- area for ritual washing by Muslims prior to prayer
- **Minaret**- tower where the call for prayer is amplified from. This can be near or attached to the main structure of the mosque
- **Qubba**- dome (over time this has come to represent “the vault of heaven”)
- **Iwan**- a vaulted space that opens on one side to a courtyard (used pre-Islamic Iran in imperial architecture)
- **Hypostyle**- a building with a roof supported by several rows of pillars

B. Mosque Architecture Evolution Key Points

- The Prophet Muhammed’s home is considered the first mosque. It resembled the typical home of 7th century Medina (Saudi Arabia), including a courtyard and covered areas with columns supporting the roof.
- The mosque over time would evolve to incorporate regional building styles, though three main plans dominate: The Hypostyle Mosque, The Four Iwan Mosque & the Centrally Planned Mosque.
- Mosques evolved from a space for prayer into greater complexes that additionally included spaces for community gatherings and education.

C. 3 Basic Mosque Plans

1. Hypostyle Mosque Plan

- Earliest mosque type
- Inspired by the house of the Prophet Muhammad
- Hypostyle hall and inner sahn

2. Four Iwan Mosque Plan

- Introduced in 11th century Iran
- Basically converted hypostyle mosques to incorporate 4 iwans

3. Centrally Planned Mosque

- Embraced by the Ottoman Empire, influenced by the Byzantine Christian Church *Hagia Sophia* and its central dome
- Becomes a prominent form in the 1500s

Lesson Part 2 - Identifying Architectural features and Floor plans of AP AH Mosques

After successfully categorizing images with their appropriate forms, more complex images representing the AP College Board's Art History required mosques are shared. Students should observe the images and locate the key architectural forms and plan that each mosque contains and represents.

The following are mosques that are required by the College Board Curriculum:

- *The Great Mosque of Cordoba*
- *Al-Masjid al-Ḥarām (The Grand Mosque AKA The Forbidden Mosque AKA Great Mosque of Mecca, surrounding the Kabba)*
- *Hagia Sophia*
- *Mosque of Selim II*
- *Masjid-e Jameh (The Great Mosque of Isfahan)*
- *Great Mosque of Djenne*

Lesson Part 3 - Site Visit & Applying Knowledge

Students will visit a local mosque outside of prayer time (or virtually visit a number of mosques) and document the architectural features and plans discussed. Prior to an in person visit, it is essential to discuss proper etiquette in a sacred space. In addition, students should be provided with information on appropriate dress.

Students should locate and identify the following components (items with an asterisk may or may not be visible at your local mosque*)

- | | |
|--------------|--------------|
| ○ Masjid | ○ Sahn* |
| ○ Musalla | ○ Minaret* |
| ○ Mihrab | ○ Qubba* |
| ○ Qibla Wall | ○ Iwan* |
| ○ Minbar | ○ Hypostyle* |

Students should determine the plan of the mosque

- Central Plan
- Four Iwan Plan
- Hypostyle Plan

Upon completion of the site visit, students should reflect independently on their experience. As a class, students should reflect on the experience as a whole and the similarities and differences visible in the mosque visited vs. the mosques required by the College Board.

Options to Expand on this Activity

1. You may want to include the decorative elements of the mosques discussed, including lighting (both windows and light fixtures), tile, floor treatments, prayer rugs and calligraphy.
2. Ask students to further compare mosque architectural component function with the architectural structures of varying faiths.

Annotated Resources and References

“Common Types of Mosque Architecture.” *Khan Academy*.

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-islam/beginners-guide-islamic-world-art/beginners-guide-islamic-art/a/common-types-of-mosque-architecture>

- A short article elaborating on the 3 main mosque plans that provides visual examples. Appropriate for high school readers and above.

Kahera, A. (2017). *Design Criteria for Mosques and Islamic Centers*. Amsterdam, Elsevier

- A contemporary text (also available online) that highlights contemporary mosque design with special consideration given to construction within limited urban spaces.

Kubn, D. (1974). *Muslim Religious Architecture: Part 1 The Mosque and Its Early Development*. Leiden: Brill.

- A thorough and extensive introduction to the history and early evolution of mosque architecture. The text includes a multitude of photographs and floor plans. Individual components of the mosque and their changes through time are also discussed.

Kubn, D. (1985). *Muslim Religious Architecture: Part 2 Development of Religious Architecture in Late Periods*. Leiden: Brill.

- An expansion on the history of mosque architecture discussed in *Muslim Religious Architecture: Part 1 The Mosque and Its Early Development*.

“Virtual Historic Mosques” *Sites in 3D*. <http://www.3dmekanlar.com/en/3d-historic-mosques.html>

- A collection of virtual tours of historical mosques, an excellent source for school districts unable to attend a mosque in person.

Weisbin, K. “Introduction to Mosque Architecture.” *Khan Academy*.

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-islam/beginners-guide-islamic-world-art/beginners-guide-islamic-art/a/introduction-to-mosque-architecture>

- An introduction to mosque architecture and the terms of key components in all/most mosques. Appropriate for high school readers and above.

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