The Art of Hajj

It is laid down in the Qur’an that at least once in their lives Muslims should undertake the annual spiritual pilgrimage—the Hajj—to the holy city of Mecca. Makkah, within a sanctuary known as the Ka’bah—a cube of black granite that is the literal centre of a Muslim’s world and the common point towards which daily prayers are made.

A visual treasury, The Art of Hajj explores the artistic world surrounding the pilgrimage, its rituals and sacred sites. Here are richly embroidered textiles, central images for the Koran, delicate watercolours from prayer books, and many surviving examples of illuminated manuscripts decorative tiles depicting the sanctuaries of Mecca and Medina. Beautifully crafted ornaments and gold embossed photographs portray the work of artists, modern artists, and scenes painted contemporaries in returning travellers.

This striking little book not only makes the reader an eyewitness, but celebrates the skill and creativity of artists, both past and present, who have attempted to tell the story of Hajj over the centuries.

Venetia Porter

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Introduction

Proclaim the Pilgrimage to mankind. They will come to you on foot and on every kind of swift mount, emerging from every deep recess.

Qur’an 22:27

Fig. 1
Hajj by Reem Al Faisal, 2003–5

Born in Jeddah, Reem Al Faisal studied literature at King Saud University before pursuing a career in photography in France. She is fascinated by the Hajj, which she has photographed over a period of years:

"From the first day of the Hajj one is swept away by the sheer motion and size of it and you find yourself moving at another level of your consciousness. As you perform one ritual after the other you slowly discover the rhythm of the universe."

Hajj is the annual pilgrimage to the sacred city of Mecca, known in Arabic as ‘Makkah al-Mukarrama’ (’Mecca the Blessed’), and its environs. It is laid down in the Qur’an that at least once in their lives, if they are able, all Muslims must undertake this journey. An intensely personal experience as well as a collective public act, the Hajj is undertaken at a specific time of year, starting on the eighth day of Dhul-Hijjah, the last month in the Muslim lunar calendar, and continuing for five days. Dressed in plain white garments, known as Ihram, the Hajjis follow a sequence of rituals, each of which has particular symbolic meaning and resonance. Muslims have been going on Hajj since the seventeenth century. The Prophet Muhammad performed the only Hajj circumstances allowed him in 632, the year of his death. With him were just a few thousand Muslims, all from Arabia. Today, each year at least three million from all over the world make this spiritual journey.
At the heart of Mecca is the Ka’ba, situated within a sanctuary known as the al-Masjid al-Haram (‘the Sacred Mosque’), or simply as al-Haram (‘the Sanctuary’), which comprises a mosque and other buildings. The Ka’ba is a cube-shaped hollow structure, about eight metres square, made of granite. According to the Qur’an, it was built by the Prophet Abraham (Ibrahim) and his son Ishmael (Ibrahīm). Muslims also believe that as time passed most of their descendants abandoned the true religion for paganism. The revolution of Islam to the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century revived monotheism and the original Abrahamic ideals. Embedded in one corner of the Ka’ba is the Black Stone, which pilgrims either touch or salute with a gesture before circling it seven times: tawaf, or circumambulation of the Ka’ba, is the first of the essential rites of the Hajj and also of the Umra, or lesser pilgrimage. According to some traditions, the Black Stone descended from Paradise pure white, but the sins of the descendants of Adam turned it black.

The rituals of the Hajj and visiting Mecca and Medina, the goal of a lifetime for Muslims, have inspired writers to recount the experience of their spiritual journeys and their reactions on reaching the holy cities. The Hajj has also inspired many artists and craftsmen, only some of whom have signed their works — for the most part they remain anonymous. Their skills can be seen in the objects highlighted in this book: colourful depictions and evocations of the holy places in manuscripts, Hajj certificates and tiles, and on the walls of houses: the instruments made to find the direction of Mecca; the glorious textiles offered to the two sanctuaries; the imaginative works by modern artists.

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As regards the spellings of Arabic words, we have opted for simplicity. The only transliteration is for the letter ‘ayn and the hamza where they occur in the middle of a word (as in Ka’ba or Qur’an). Dates are given in CE form. For the translations from the Qur’an, we have generally used the translation by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem.
Chapter 1

Mecca: Centre of the World

Turn your faces in the direction of the Sacred Mosque; wherever you [the believers] may be, turn your faces to it.

Qur'an 2:144

At first, Muslims faced Jerusalem in accordance with Jewish tradition. A revelation to the Prophet Muhammad then ordained that Muslims should face Mecca when they prayed. The sacred direction towards the Ka'ba is known as the qibla. For Muslims living close to Mecca, finding the qibla presented little problem. However, as the community spread beyond Arabia, determining the exact direction of the qibla became a major preoccupation. It soon became normal practice in mosques for the direction of prayer to be indicated by a niche known as a mihrab.

At the same time, Muslim scholars developed procedures, charts and instruments for determining the qibla. Some depended on using the stars or other natural phenomena for guidance. Other, more complex techniques and instruments could be used at home or while travelling, perhaps across remote regions or else by sea. They were also applied when laying the foundations of a mosque. The introduction of the magnetic compass from China enabled the production of small instruments which when correctly oriented by means of a metal needle could indicate the qibla from a variety of locations.
Fig. 3  World map pasted into a copy of the Tarhi-i Hindi Gharbi, 'History of the West Indies' (fol. 99b), a Turkish work on the discovery of the Americas, compiled in or before 1580 by an anonymous Ottoman author.

Manuscript on bounched European paper, dated 1650. 21.3 x 15.3 cm. Leiden University Library, Leiden

The projection of the world in which the south rather than the north is shown at the top is a convention followed by Muslim geographers originally inspired by the maps of the ancient world. The seas and oceans are painted in deep blue and major cities such as Baghdad, Damascus and Cairo are represented by tiny architectural sketches. The legendary 'mountain of the moon' where the palace of Alexander is said to have stood is depicted as a red niche at the top left. Placing the Ka'ba at the very centre of a geographical representation of the world as it was then known gives this map into the realm of sacred geography. The Ka'ba is shown with its traditional black cloth covering (kiswa), and the hilt (hisam), pointed in gold. Below is an arch with niches suggesting the mahabat in a mosque and emphasizing that this is the direction of prayer.

Fig. 4  Manual for calculating prayer times (fol. 13a) by Abi al-Bahman ibn Abdallah al-Tuluni al-Ishari, copied by Muhammad ibn Ibrahim al-Najahi al-Shafi', dated 1715. 21.3 x 13.2 cm. Chester Beatty Library, Dublin

Performing the salat – the five daily prayers – is one of the five pillars of Islam. They comprise the morning prayer (fajr), the midday prayer (dhuhr), the afternoon prayer (asr), the prayer after sunset (maghrib) and the evening prayer (isha). To enable the correct times for these to be determined, an instrument known as a quadrant was developed by Muslim astronomers. Designed as a flat plate, it has a scale of ninety degrees along the curved edge with a plumb-line and bob suspended from the tip of the right angle. The quadrant could be used by the muwaffiq, who was in charge of fixing the times of the prayers in the larger mosques, or by an individual. This manuscript text explains how to calculate prayer times using a quadrant.
fig. 5
Qibla indicator and sundial
Ottoman Turkey, 1582
Painted ivory
11 cm diameter
British Museum, London

This unusual instrument for finding the direction of Mecca (qibla) was made by Bayram bin Ilyas, who has signed his name on the face of the instrument. The sail-shaped feature between the Kibba and the compass is a sundial that enables the user to find the time of the salat (prayer). It is calibrated in so-called "sail hours" - the length of daylight between sunrise and sunset divided into twelve parts whose duration changes over the course of the year. The innermost of the concentric circles is also laid out as a sundial, but indicates equal hours (as in most clocks and watches). The string, which is attached to the tip of the metal pin and threaded through a hole in the ivory, casts a shadow that allows both sundials to be used in conjunction. To do this, the instrument is placed on a flat surface and rotated until the needle on the compass is correctly aligned in a north-south direction. When the metal pin points due north, then the string is properly aligned towards the North Pole and the sundial will indicate the correct time - but only for the latitude for which it was constructed.

The seventy-two sectors around the rim contain the names of cities and regions in the Islamic world. This is not intended to be an accurate "map," but an approximation, with places that are in the same region (and thus have roughly the same qibla) grouped together. To give an example, imagine the dial of a clock with numbers one to twelve around the outer rim. The foot of the metal pin is at 12 o'clock. The places listed between 12 o'clock and 3 are all roughly north-east of Mecca and so their qibla direction is south-west. To use the qibla indicator at a particular place, one would first identify that place in the list and its position in relation to the Kibba in the centre. Then one would align the instrument in a north-south direction with the help of the compass to determine the approximate direction of the Kibba.
Fig. 6
Qibla indicator and compass

Dated 1738
Lacquered wood
30 cm diameter

Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo

This instrument, encased within a box, is one of a number made by an Armenian named Bedros Barun for the Ottoman grand vizier Yegen Mehemet Pasha in the 1730s. Barun was an interpreter for the Dutch Legation in Istanbul. He combined a European map with a compass and a pointer towards Mecca, and a list of countries and cities with their co-ordinates. On the top of the box is a topographical representation of the sanctuary at Mecca itself, surrounded by the other key locations within the enclosure. Below, the text in Ottoman Turkish explains how the compass should be used. The outside of the instrument is elegantly painted with colourful designs in a baroque style typical of Ottoman art of this period.
Chapter 2

The Journey

I set out by myself with no companion to cheer me along or any caravan to join with, compelled by an overwhelming urge and a long held desire in my heart to visit those famous sanctuaries. So I confirmed my decision to leave everyone dear to me ... and flew from my home as birds desert their nests.

Ibn Battuta, 1325

Fig. 7
The Magamat (Assemblies) of al-Hariri (fol. 94b)

Baghdad, 1237
Opaque watercolour, ink and gold on paper
39 x 34 cm
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris

This manuscript is one of the masterpieces of Arab painting. It was written and illustrated by the artist Yahya al-Hariri, who came from the city of Wasit in Iraq. This folio depicts the caravan to Mecca setting off from Ramla in Palestine. The pilgrims carry banners and play trumpets and drums. One of the camels carries a yellow pelengan, the colour of the Mamluk mahmal.

From the furthest reaches of the Islamic world, from Timbuktu to China, pilgrims made the spiritual journey that was the ambition of a lifetime. Because the Hajj must be performed at a designated time, for practical reasons pilgrims generally moved together in convoys. These were sometimes so great that they are described as cities on the move. Those travelling overland by camel or on foot congregated at various major cities such as Damascus in Syria or Cairo in Egypt. Pilgrims coming by sea would enter Arabia at the port of Jeddah. In the past the journey to Mecca could be extremely dangerous: pilgrims often fell ill, they could be robbed on the way and become destitute. However, they did not fear dying on the journey as they believed that if they did so they would go to heaven with their sins erased. These journeys across land and sea are colourfully evoked in manuscripts and paintings.