

## THE BIG PICTURE

# What does the Calligraphic Galleon tell us about Islam?

Turkey, c.1766 CE





This image is full of significant learning about Islam. Unpack it with your students and see how many connections they can make to the syllabus they study. Provide the information points one by one, but begin by asking students to look and notice everything they can from the image, and make some guesses about its significance. Ask learners to tackle the questions and activities at the end.

### The context

This beautiful picture of an Ottoman galleon is about 250 years old. As Muslims make no pictures of Allah, there is a rich tradition of using beautiful lettering – calligraphy – in art. In this example, the words chosen to create the picture of the ship reflect some concerns of sailors: safety and protection, for example. Life on the ocean can be dangerous – do sailors pray more than most people?

### The story of the picture

The Muslim Ottoman empire was in the territory of modern Turkey. The picture follows Islamic rules of art, which forbid the depiction of Allah and often use patterns and lettering for artistic effect. The work is dedicated to Sultan Mustafa bin Sultan Ahmed III, who ruled from 1757–74 CE. The artwork uses a calligram, an image made of letters. It includes the names of the ‘Seven Sleepers of Ephesus’ and their dog Qitmir, who are in a story included in the (Qur’an) (Surah 18). The standard on the stern contains the famous ‘Throne Verse’. The sun-like circle in the sky is the artist’s signature: *Abdu’l Qadir al-Hisari in Akşehir, AH 1180*. The Prophet Muhammad is celebrated in the Turkish poetic verses that surround the frame.

### Islamic sources of authority

The words incorporated into this picture are from the ‘Throne Verse’. Here is an English translation:

Allah, there is no God but Him! He is The Living, The Everlasting. Neither tiredness nor sleep overwhelm Him. All that is in The Heavens and on Earth belongs to Him. Who dares intercede without His permission? He knows what lies in front of them and what lies behind them, but they can only grasp what he wishes of his knowledge. His Majestic Throne extends over the Heavens and the Earth, and He never tires of protecting them both. He is The Exalted, The Majestic.

(Qur’an 2:255) [Musharraf Hussain (trans.), *The Majestic Quran*, Invitation Publishing 2018]



### For the classroom

#### Key concepts

- Allah: Islamic understandings of God are both exalted and majestic and personal/intimate. Sailors, facing the dangers of the sea, might take comfort and reassurance from the idea that Allah is in control, and never gets tired.
- *Ibadah*, worship: The artist who made this image dedicates himself to God through his work. It is interesting to think about art as devotion; this example has lasted 250 years.

#### Questions

- Discuss with a partner how this artist has used letters to make the picture. Look for four examples.
- The ‘Calligraphic Galleon’ was painted in Turkey over 250 years ago. What does it tell you about Islamic civilisation in those days?

#### Activities

- Can you copy this picture? Copying is an unusual activity in RE lessons, but it does, in a case like this, make you think and look really carefully. Count the masts, sails, yardarms, decks and portholes. Can you include the Arabic lettering, or would your picture look better and make more sense if you used the English text of the ‘Throne Verse’?
- What does the ‘Throne Verse’ proclaim about Muslim beliefs?

#### Comment

**A conversation starter:** ‘In many religions, art inspired by faith is seen as an act of worship. It is worth thinking about the motivation of Abdu’l Qadir al-Hisari: how did he come to make this work? What does it say to us across the centuries about the civilisation that he lived in? Maybe modern viewers can learn from the study of this kind of work that our technology may be advanced, but our vision can still be informed from an artwork like this, from far away, long ago.’



Note: an additional PowerPoint resource based on this picture is available on our subscribers website. [www.natre.org.uk/retoday-e-resources/](http://www.natre.org.uk/retoday-e-resources/)