
THE ARAB CULTURE

The Arabs have a rich ancient culture. Arab literature, architecture, art, and music are unique, in that they all use various forms to express the beauty of the **Arabic language**.

The Qur'an, the holy book of Islam, is the first Arabic book. Its style, at once vigorous, allusive, and concise, deeply influenced later compositions in **Arabic literature**. However, long before the coming of Islam, Bedouin poets had perfected the forms of panegyric, satire, and elegy, before it was finally committed to writing by scholars. The principal form used by the desert poets was the Qasidah or ode, a complex poem of variable length rhyming in the last syllable of each line.

Later, the Arabic prose came into being not from literary motives, but to serve religious and practical needs. The post classical period saw the composition of popular romances. The most famous work of this period is *The Thousand and One Nights*. Over a nucleus translated from Sanskrit then to Persian, Arab storytellers added local coloring to the foreign tales.

Contemporary Arab literature has taken new forms, especially with the swift growth of journalism, and the translation into Arabic of many Western literary and scientific works.

Arab art was enriched by many different cultures, absorbing them and evolving its own distinct qualities. The Arabs created a new style of architecture and decoration compatible with their religious principles. Examples of splendid architecture exist in many cities throughout the Arab world, in Spain, and in East Asia.

Artists used non-realist, non-figurative forms to express themselves. Floral, geometric and epigraphic motifs characterized their works. Thus, Arabic calligraphy evolved to become one of the finest in the world. The decorative repertoire of metalwork, ceramics, textiles and glass clearly indicates the impact of the art of writing on the visual arts.

Contemporary Arab art is close to contemporary Western art, although political, and human rights themes are more common in Arab art.

Music has always enriched the daily life of the Arab people. Arabic music is not built on the Western major and minor scales, but on more ancient forms known as modes. In Arabic these are called Maqams that contain intervals known as quarter, eighth, and sixteenth tones. In Western music, the smallest tonal interval is the half-tone. The most famous Arab musical instrument is the Aoud, the ancestor of the European Lute.

Arabic songs, for the most part, tend to be love songs, praising the beloved, or complaining of a beloved's coldness or indifference. Some songs, on the other hand, are lively and lend themselves to dance.

The Dabke, is a form of Arab **folk dancing** that incorporates the primitive movements preserved from the ancient Arab culture with an eastern European influence. Dabke line dances, performed by both men and women, are popular in Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, and Iraq. Other forms of folk dancing exist in the Arab countries. Most are based on primitive movements-rhythmic dancing. And although Belly Dancing is popular, its origin is Indian.

The Arab World is at cross roads between the Orient, Africa and the Mediterranean world. Its history and culture are testimony of the vital role that it has and still plays in the global world.

*The information in this flier was compiled by Rima Houssami for educational use only
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