

# ART EDUCATION: A LESSON PLAN FOR HENNA BODY PAINTING

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The art form of Henna calligraphy tattooing, historically known as mehndi, has been around for centuries. Intricate application of henna upon the body is symbolically used for various reasons as a marker of social, ritual or marital status within cultures such as India, Morocco or Islam. Lalla Essaydi captures the intricate detail of Arabic henna calligraphy art through her images alongside Arab culture and Islamic tradition.

## **Cultural History**

Henna calligraphy tattooing has a long history within many cultures dating back 5000 years, tracing the beginning steps to ancient Egypt. In ancient Egypt, a ritual process would take place after a Pharaoh would depart into the afterlife, otherwise known to Egyptians as reincarnation. Prior to mummification, henna staining of the fingers and toes was a customary sacrament. In addition, careful application of intricate designs etched onto the skin of a deceased Pharaoh was a collective ritual performed by the Egyptians. Recognized by the Pharaohs, henna tattooing was a dedicated process with religious intentions honoring the deceased and the afterlife.

Alongside ancient Egypt, the art form of henna calligraphy is recognized within other cultures as well. Henna ceremonial art originated in India. Mehndi in Indian culture is the term used for henna calligraphy art. Mehndi is the hand application of the elaborate

designs which are carefully tattooed through immense focus for detail and placement by the women who prepare the bride for her special day. Within the Indian culture, prior to the ceremonial wedding, the convoluted process of Mehndi takes place.

Delicate blending of fine lines and striking patterns cover large areas of the female's body. Patterns and swirls representing animals, flowers and symbolic images are painted onto her body prior to the special moment of matrimony. The art form of henna calligraphy can vary from region to region. Unlike Egyptian culture or cultures within India, a similar art form of henna tattooing is recognized through Arabic culture as well. Focus is placed within the patterns alongside floral designs comparable to the style of henna calligraphy in Indian culture. Henna is the translated Arabic term used for Mehndi, calligraphy body art. African and Native South/American Indian women have used henna tattooing for centuries by using patterns through geometric designs for local tradition. Henna calligraphy art has been prevalent for centuries and is still recognized and embraced today within many cultures around the globe.

### **What is henna made of?**

Henna is a tree or shrub (*Lawsonia inermis*) of the Middle East, having fragrant white or reddish flowers. Henna tattooing is derived from the henna plant. The leaves of the plant contain tannins, a natural dyeing property which is dried and crushed into a fine powder.

A paste is then created and when combined with water or oil, stains the skin upon application. Henna can be applied to any part of the body and comes in a variety of

colors such as brown, orange, purple, green, blue or red. Henna can also be used as a cosmetic dye and for coloring leather and fabrics.

### **Lalla Essaydi's View on Henna**

Through her images, Lalla Essaydi reclaims the traditional art form of henna calligraphy through a careful process. Arabic traditions of henna calligraphy tattooing amongst the women are a very essential part of her work. Essaydi states, "I have been able to express, and yet, in another sense, dissolve the contradictions I have encountered in my culture: between hierarchy and fluidity, between public and private space, between the richness and the confining aspects of Islamic traditions". (<http://lallaessaydi.com/6.html>) Lalla Essaydi states the importance of woman, Islamic tradition and art within her culture.

### **Lalla Essaydi Art Education Lesson Plan**

While the focus will be on Lalla Essaydi's images flanking Islamic culture and background, the history of Henna calligraphy art and how it varies within different cultures will be present. Students will attend the exhibit gaining as much information as possible on Lalla Essaydi, her work and the purpose of her images within the exhibit. Students will be able to visualize and explore the images displayed and will have an opportunity to ask questions about what is being viewed. Furthermore, students will have an opportunity to experience a hands on activity of henna calligraphy art. An exhibit will be set up where students can approach an area displaying henna calligraphy where students will have an opportunity to receive a temporary henna tattoo through the ritual process similar to the cultures mentioned above. Through this experience, students

will not only understand the mental concept and history of henna calligraphy but also gain a visual aspect as well through a personal experience. Often when children are provided with a tangible opportunity, the educational process of what is being studied sinks through to the student on a deeper level of learning connecting to other parts of the learning process. In conclusion, focus will be drawn to a specific piece of art created by Essaydi called, *La Grande Odalisque*”, which will be on display within the exhibit for the students to observe.

Within this specific art piece, Essaydi calls attention to the women within the image through her dyed feet and inscribed face. The process of henna calligraphy art which is clearly present within the image demonstrates Arabic illustrations which are highlighted. An essential learning opportunity is present for children to experience Islamic culture and tradition in conjunction with the art form and history of Henna calligraphy art.



***“La Grande Odalisque” by Lalla Essaydi***

## Cited Sources

<http://lallaessaydi.com/6.html>

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