



Today's Masterpiece: [*The Ka'ba in Mecca*](#) and [*The Tomb of the Prophet in Medina*](#).
Illustrations from a manuscript of the *Dala'il al-khayrat* (Guide to Good Deeds, a collection of prayers for the Prophet Muhammad). India, 17th century. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper. Edwin Binney 3rd Collection, 1990.478 and 1990.478.1.

Welcome back to **Masterpiece Minute at Virtual SDMA**. This is your host, Mai Kolkailah, Research Assistant for South Asian and Islamic Art at The San Diego Museum of Art. Drop in the first Friday of each month to hear a new mini talk led by Museum curators or guests focusing on works of art from the Museum's collection.

In celebration of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, today's episode highlights a beautiful double-page illustration from seventeenth-century India depicting two sanctuaries for Muslims around the world. Pictured at left is the Great Mosque of Mecca, located in Saudi Arabia and identified by a series of iconic architectural elements associated with this important site. The most iconic of these is the Ka'ba, represented by a black square at the center of the mosque courtyard. The Ka'ba, a square stone structure draped in gold-embroidered black cloth, marks the direction of prayer for all Muslims. Surrounding it, we can also see the Great Mosque's seven minarets, which are towers wherefrom the faithful are called to prayer; two minbars, which are stepped pulpits used for delivering sermons, appearing here as triangles in profile; several domed structures; and an arcade framing the rectangular courtyard. On the opposite page at right, we see the Prophet Muhammad's Mosque in Medina, about a four-hour drive from Mecca. The Prophet's Mosque is signified by the depiction of four rectangular structures representing the tombs of the Prophet Muhammad, who died in 632; his successors Abu Bakr and 'Umar ibn al-Khattab; and the Prophet's beloved daughter, Fatima. Outside the burial chamber, other distinctive visual features include the Prophet's venerated minbar, or pulpit, here shown in profile with its three steps, and the mihrab, a niche marking the direction of prayer toward Mecca, slightly jutting out along the upper arcade. These two detailed illustrations of perhaps the most important pilgrimage sites for Muslims combine a bird's-eye view of each mosque with a flat projection of their structures, adopting the conventions of display established by pilgrimage guidebooks popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

In fact, this double-page illustration of Mecca and Medina comes from a seventeenth-century copy of a manuscript entitled the *Dala'il al-khayrat*, or "Guide to Good Deeds." Originally composed in Arabic in fifteenth-century Morocco by the mystic and Sufi scholar Muhammad al-Jazuli, the *Dala'il* was a renowned book containing prayers devoted to the Prophet Muhammad. The text includes a list of the Prophet's 201 names; a description of his tomb as well as those of his successors; and prayers designated for recitation each day of the week. It is believed that this collection of prayers for the Prophet brings an abundance of blessings and good luck to those who recite it consistently. Manuscripts of this text also carried a talismanic association, as they were thought to provide protection, and historical accounts mention that they were taken into battle for strength and encouragement. With such spiritual and talismanic benefits, the *Dala'il al-khayrat* gained immense popularity, circulating widely from North Africa to Southeast Asia and becoming the most copied religious book in the Islamic world after the Qur'an.



While most copies of the *Dala'il al-Khayrat* share similar textual content, structure, and iconography, they can vary in style depending on local artistic traditions. The Museum's example represents a shift in the manuscript's pictorial program during the seventeenth century, when double-page images showing the Mecca and Medina were introduced after an earlier practice of depicting only Medina. Some scholars suggest that this side-by-side depiction of the two holy sites is a visual expression of the Muslim *shahada*, or profession of faith, that God is one, first and foremost, and that Muhammad is God's messenger. Others propose that the imagery was meant to evoke these sacred spaces, allowing pious readers of the devotional text to visualize mentally the direction of their prayer and visit these pilgrimage sites virtually.

Our seventeenth-century paintings display a particularly fine abundance of structural details and decorative elements. The night sky in the Medina painting provides an exceptional layer of atmospheric perspective to the overall scene. The three palm trees south of the Prophet's burial chamber in this image not only signal the outdoors section of the Mosque, but also specifically reference Fatima's garden. Vine scrolls fill the cartouches in the borders of the illustrations and cover the various domes. While the fine draftsmanship and liberal use of gold suggest that this double-page illustration belonged to a subgroup of luxury copies, the *Dala'il al-khayrat* was produced and used by believers from every level of society. Regardless of how or by whom these moving *Dala'il* pages were used, they would surely have held great spiritual value for their pious owners.

Thank you for listening, and Ramadan Mubarak! This has been **Mai** on **Masterpiece Minute at Virtual SDMA!**



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