



# The Art of Henna

## Themina Kader

In the context of art and aesthetics, decorating one's body using henna is closely aligned with modifications such as tattooing and scarifications. Henna (also called mehndi) painting is often erroneously referred to as henna tattooing. Henna, a dye made from the dried and ground plant, *lawsonia inermis*, is made into a paste and painted on the skin. It is not permanent.

Henna painting as an art form provides a non-threatening and tangible

approach for introducing Islamic culture into an art class. This ancient art has been found on five-thousand-year-old mummies in Egypt and Indian cave paintings in the Punjab Hills of Kangra.

Henna is a symbol of good omen and enhances the auspiciousness of specific events such as weddings and festivals. In Muslim weddings, women, particularly brides, show off their intricately henna-painted hands and feet. Eid, the festival celebrating

the end of the fasting month of Ramadan, is another occasion that provides Muslim women and girls a reason for applying henna, usually in designs based on floral and geometric patterns.

Culturally for Muslims, henna painting is an occasion for bringing together families and friends in a spirit of community and celebration. Following is a lesson plan that provides a springboard for a multicultural experience.

## References

- Dorine Van Den Beukel, *Traditional Mehndi Designs*. Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2000.  
Sumita Batra, *The Art of Mehndi*. London, Carlton Books, Ltd., 1999.

## Introducing Henna

Begin by discussing the many concepts/methods of making oneself beautiful, such as cosmetics, tattoos, scarifications, dress, and accessories.

Share the background history of henna and henna painting and discuss the differences between henna and tattooing. Discuss possibilities for motifs and designs. Have students draw their motifs on paper first before attempting to paint on their hands.

## Henna in Powder Form

Traditionally, henna in powder form was made into a paste and applied using a pointed tool such as a toothpick. The powder was thoroughly mixed with either concentrated tea or lemon juice to make a smooth, thick paste with a consistency of a moisturizing cream.

## Henna in Pre-made Cones

Henna cones are now available in stores and can be easily purchased online. The cone is made from fairly strong plastic and one end of the cone ends in a point, which is cut off to allow the henna to squeeze out in a line. For the classroom, buying ready-made cones is both inexpensive and time saving. An Internet search on henna cones will elicit many choices

in terms of the price range and number required.

## Applying Henna

Students can work in pairs, or each student can make a motif on his or her own hand. Encourage students to keep the motif on their body for at least an hour before removing it. Have students gently scrape the henna off of their skin with a blunt knife or their fingernails. Have them rub some oil or lotion on their hands to remove excess henna and to improve its color. The designs should be visible for one to two weeks.

**Note:** Secure permission from parents before using henna with students. Do not use any product called black henna, as it has other ingredients added to it. ☞

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## WEB LINK

[www.rupalpinto.com/mehndi/five.html](http://www.rupalpinto.com/mehndi/five.html)

## Objectives

By the end of the lesson students will be able to:

- explain the terms henna and henna painting.
- describe how henna is prepared.
- explain how henna is different from tattooing.
- express appreciation of the values attached to the use of henna in non-American cultures.
- use henna to make patterns on one's hands or another part of the body.

## Materials

- henna in powder form
- henna cones
- paper towels
- petroleum jelly or oil such as clove or tea tree oil
- toothpicks
- six tablespoons sugar
- eight ounces of water
- concentrated black tea
- fresh lemon juice