

Treasured Ornament: 10 Centuries of Islamic Art

The diverse objects exhibited here represent an array of cultures, regions, and time periods. “Islamic” art is a broad umbrella term encompassing all the arts produced in areas that were socially and culturally associated with Islam and Muslims. It includes a stretch of land that reaches from North Africa across the Middle East to South Asia and a history spanning thousands of years. Historically, Western stereotypes tend to exoticize, sensationalize, or demonize these regions in popular culture. This exhibition presents a much richer and more accurate story, offering insight into the diverse ways art reflects the cultural context—social, political, or economic—in which it was created and used.

While these objects showcase the artistic output of various regions over ten centuries, they share certain visual commonalities shaped partly by Islam’s prevailing cultural and religious practices and cross-cultural exchange among many dynamic groups. These include a reverence for the written word, emphasis on learning about the world, and prevalence of botanical motifs meant to reference the richness of God’s creation and the gardens of Paradise. While figural decorations adorn many secular objects, the tendency to avoid the depiction of human figures in religious spaces resulted in richly decorated objects that ventured into abstraction centuries before it would come to dominate the Western art world. With these objects, we see cultures that did not relegate art to walls and pedestals but chose to infuse beauty into the everyday.

Forming a Collection: Drs. Joseph and Omayma Touma

This exhibition comprises works from the Touma Near Eastern Collection at the Huntington Museum of Art in West Virginia. Growing up in the Christian Quarter of the Old City in Damascus, Syria, the Toumas encountered art and centuries-old monuments daily. After emigrating to the United States in 1971, the couple began collecting objects that reflected the richness of the art and culture of their homeland and neighboring regions. Between 1991 and 2004, the Toumas donated over 400 objects to the Huntington.

Spanning from antiquity to the 20th century, the objects in their collection originate from a wide array of regions, extending beyond the Middle East to include Asia Minor, Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, North Africa, and Southern Spain. The collection highlights the multifaceted cultures of this vast geographic area, encompassing pre-Roman, Roman, Greek, pre-Islamic, Islamic, Christian, Hindu, and Jewish civilizations. The couple hopes that sharing their collection with the public will provide a bridge to learn about and appreciate their homeland's history, culture, and traditions. The Toumas believe art is a way to advance understanding and goodwill between nations, religions, and people. In this exhibit, each object is labeled with its region and date of origin, highlighting the rich diversity within the collection.

"I'm always fascinated by the history and the beauty of art, and by what art represents. It's a universal language that appeals to people of all different backgrounds." - Dr. Joseph Touma

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What is Islamic Art?

Islamic art refers to the visual arts and material culture produced in regions ruled by Muslims or for Muslim patrons. The broad term applies regardless of the artwork's function. It can refer to historical artifacts as well as contemporary art. It encompasses artworks directly associated with the religion of Islam, such as places of worship or liturgical objects, and secular items where beauty is intricately woven into practical functions. As products of the societies that commissioned, produced, and used them, these objects provide valuable insight into the diverse ways people live and interact with their environment.

The term 'Islamic art' was coined by Anglo-European scholars with a limited understanding of Islamic cultures. They used it to reference the art produced by an "exotic" other, a reductive and deficient characterization. It also perpetuated the misconception that Islamic art was permanently fixed in the medieval past and lacked the vibrancy and dynamism of the Western art tradition. In recent decades, this problematic misconception has been widely challenged. Scholars and museums are now moving away from using "Islamic art" as a monolithic global term, instead shifting towards narratives that account for the diverse modes and aesthetics of production within this category.

The region now referred to as SWANA (Southwest Asia and North Africa) was and continues to be home to a diverse population from various ethnic and religious backgrounds. While the art produced in this region shares certain traits, this should not be seen as the outcome of an innate religious or national character of Islamic art. Rather, it reflects the continuity and connectivity of cultures and practices in the region. The diversity observable in these objects should be regarded as a reflection of the complex socio-historical conditions and artistic processes present in a multicultural region.

Art of Belief

Islam originated in Mecca in 610, after the prophet Muhammad received the first revelation at the age of 40. As the religion spread across the region, it became embedded within existing traditions while inspiring new artistic and architectural forms, like mosques, elaborate prayer rugs, and Arabic calligraphy. Some of these developments were driven in part by religion. For instance, astronomical study flourished partly because knowledge of the stars helped calculate when and in which direction to pray.

Though many regions of Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) were shaped to some extent by Islam, the area has always encompassed vibrant places where religious groups intermingle. Christians, Jews, Hindus, Zoroastrians, and Buddhists contributed to the vibrant communities within this geographic expanse. Many artworks and buildings considered "Islamic" were created for or by people of other faiths. For this reason, the Toumas also collected objects that reflect belief systems outside of Islam, including copies of sacred Hindu texts and Christian icons. Such religious objects underscore that despite their different ways of worship, these groups lived, worked, and created art alongside each other.

Art of Learning

According to the Qur'an—the central holy text of Islam—the pen was the first object created by God. The written word is highly esteemed in Islamic art as the embodiment of the word of God. It is no surprise then that literacy, and by extension learning, was centrally important in Islamic societies. Objects created for the pursuit of knowledge, such as scientific instruments, were not just practical but also an opportunity for artisans to showcase their artistic talents and elite patrons to display their wealth.

There was much to learn from a free-flowing exchange of ideas, both from the people and objects that traveled along trade routes and through translating scientific treatises, which were written in Greek, Sanskrit, and Pahlavi (an early form of Persian). Arabic translations introduced many of these texts in Europe. The period from the 8th to 15th centuries became known as the “golden age” of Islamic science, though contributions were made by people of many religions in Islamic centers throughout Europe, North Africa, and Asia. The advancement of mathematics and geometry in the region also contributed to the prevalence of complex, abstract geometric designs that created an illusion of infinity by repeating simple shapes.

Art of Status

Throughout history, humans have used art to demonstrate wealth and power or establish political dominance—think of imposing palatial facades or the luxurious velvet robes in a royal portrait. While the term “Islamic” art might imply art created for an explicitly religious function, many objects and buildings were commissioned by courts or noblemen and had nothing to do with the practice of Islam. These items range from ceramic tiles that might have covered entire buildings to ornate weaponry meant for display only to dazzling textiles that adorned surfaces or were transformed into garments. Whether their purpose was utilitarian or public display, these objects emphasize the complex interconnectedness of a multicultural region’s socio-historical conditions and artistic processes.

Art of the Everyday

Most of the objects in this section were not designed for mosques or palace walls but for everyday use. But everyday does not translate to mundane—even utilitarian household items showcase meticulous technique and design, from small bowls and glass vessels to large carpets. Serving dishes are often inscribed with elegant calligraphy script and vibrant glazes, while metal vessels feature elaborately hammered or cast adornment. Figural forms sometimes adorned secular objects alongside common motifs like geometric patterns and arabesques (rhythmic, scrolling patterns of interlacing foliage).

Art of Exchange

The movement of ideas, objects, cultures, and people across the globe is crucial to understanding works of art produced in Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) since antiquity. The vast network of trading posts throughout this geographic region facilitated long-distance communication, the transmission of ideas, and the emergence of a global culture. Artists, goods, and technological innovations moved freely along the Silk Road and other trade routes that connected Eastern, Central, and Western Asia and Europe.

This cultural exchange led to the cross-fertilization of motifs, designs, raw materials, and production techniques. For example, the cobalt-blue pigment that decorated the Chinese porcelain avidly collected in West Asia and Europe was mined in Iran, used locally, and exported to China. The exchange between the Mamluk and Ottoman empires and Venice—the link between Europe and Muslim powers in North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean for centuries—inspired the creation of enamel-painted glass objects in Venice. French artists revived the technique in the mid-nineteenth century, further feeding trends of cultural appropriation, including a consumerist taste for materials and objects from the so-called Islamic world.