



Reverent Ornament

ART FROM THE ISLAMIC WORLD

TRAVELING EXHIBITION SERVICE

IA&A

INTERNATIONAL
ARTS AND ARTISTS



Reverent Ornament explores the West's fascination with the arts and crafts traditions of the Middle East and beyond. The Near Eastern world—roughly, the region of Asia west of India—is a vivid patchwork of many different peoples, languages, and traditions. Its history stretches back to Neolithic times, and its dynasties and empires have contributed in major ways to the development of human knowledge. Comprising works of fine glassware, ceramics, metalwork, painting, weaponry, weaving, and much more, *Reverent Ornament* shares 45 timeless treasures from a region whose everyday life, history, and culture offer many parallels to our own. The works, some of which are centuries old, include objects meant for palaces as well as ordinary homes, evoking a rich and comprehensive vision of daily life in the Near East, both recent and long ago. If it is true that peace begins through understanding, then this ambitious collection offers us a rare opportunity for artistic exchange—a bridge between cultures.

1. Southern Transcaucasia, *Rug*, late 19th century, wool. Gift of Drs. Joseph and Omayma Touma and family.

The Traditional Arts of Everyday in the Near East



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The region known today as the Near East comprises the lands wrapped around the eastern end of the Mediterranean: Asia Minor and eastern Thrace in the north, Egypt to the south, and Syria and what was long called Palestine to the east. It also includes some lands that do not border on the Mediterranean: Transjordan, Mesopotamia, and, further to the east, Iran; parts of Transcaucasia to the northeast; and the lands of Arabia to the southeast. Together, these territories encompass a large and central part of what today is commonly referred to as the Islamic world—a region whose cultures, societies, and daily life reflect the profound influence of the dominant faith of Islam, and whose nations largely anchor their laws and praxis in interpretations of Islamic principles. At the same time, its long history unites a multitude of diverse lands, peoples, and civilizations that have coalesced over the centuries

into a rich mosaic of ethnicities and languages, religions and sects, economic systems, and living customs—as well as complex contrasts in geography, climate, arable land, and natural resources such as water and petroleum.

One might expect that, in a region so complex and hard to define, the arts, as a whole, would reflect this diversity and present no visual or aesthetic coherence. On the contrary, it is precisely through the diversity of its food, music, dress, social customs, family organization, and (especially) the visual arts of the Near East that we can trace with deepest clarity the forces of social and cultural cohesion that—despite all of the conflicts and contradictions—continue to bind the region’s peoples and places together into one remarkable entity.

2. Iran, *Celestial Globe*, 19th century, brass. Gift of Drs. Joseph B. and Omayma Touma.

3. Egypt or Syria, *Bowl*, 19th century, brass with silver and copper inlay. Gift of Drs. Joseph and Omayma Touma and family.



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The art of the Near East over the last millennium and a half—a subset of what today is often termed Islamic art—may be defined on several generic levels. One of these is religious art; which, in the Islamic world, is typically anti-iconic, since the visual representation of humans or animals can be considered idolatrous. (This same iconoclastic austerity can be seen in much of the traditional Jewish art of the region.) In Christian worship, on the other hand, iconoclasm has rarely been practiced; in fact, in the Near East, images of holy personages and others have long been central to the propagation of the religious stories, miracles, and parables that embody so much of Christian ritual and belief.

A second level of art is that of courts and royalty. In marked contrast to the ascetic artworks of religion, those commissioned by rulers and ruling elites of the traditional Near East have long reveled in figural imagery, luxury, and conspicuous consumption, as a means of celebrating and promoting royal power and dynastic legitimacy. The salient characteristics of court art in the Near East (exquisite craftsmanship, costly materials, impressive scale, and public splendor), which were established long before the advent of Islam, incorporate many things frowned upon, or even strongly condemned, by orthodox Islamic thought, yet they have persevered for centuries throughout the region. This is because court art in the Near East has always enjoyed a profound cultural influence that goes far beyond its patron class, appealing to many (such as the middle class)



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who covet its prestige—not unlike the art and fashions of the trendsetting upper-crust of today's global world.

This brings us to the third level of traditional Near Eastern art, the art of what might be termed the ordinary people—i.e., the beautifully fashioned objects of daily life that for centuries have given the cities, towns, and nomadic settlements of the region much of their unique visual character. These are the arts of the everyday, which are deeply embedded in popular culture and closely entwined with everyday activities, from rites of passage (births, circumcisions, weddings, deaths) to daily chores and routines (cooking and serving food; dressing up or applying cosmetics or perfume; greeting friends in the home; decorating one's dwelling or one's camel, horse, or donkey; etc.). These are the arts that, through their utility and commonality, are most likely to unify, rather than isolate, the various communities that make up the tapestry of Near Eastern society—and connect with outsiders, such as Westerners, as well.

It is this rich subset of traditional Near Eastern art that forms the nucleus of *Reverent Ornament*. These small but beautiful relics of earlier times and cultures remind us that common values and hopes can always prevail over seemingly insurmountable boundaries—erasing time, distance, and prejudice alike—to unite disparate peoples through the commonality of their daily lives and the magic of art.



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4. Iran, Qajar, *Huqqa Base*, 19th century, copper and painted enamel. Gift of Drs. Joseph B. and Omayma Touma.
5. India, Mughal period, *Dagger*, 18th century, Dagger (A): Steel, jade, stones, and gold. Scabbard (B): wood, textile, steel, and gold. Gift of Drs. Joseph and Omayma Touma and family.
6. Iran, *Vessel*, 11th -12th century, glass. Gift of Drs. Joseph B. and Omayma Touma.

Art + Culture Traditions

For fourteen centuries, craft traditions flourished in a land of trade-based economies where art and commerce were closely intertwined. Originating, like Islam itself, in the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century, Islamic art evolved throughout the vast regions of Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe consolidated by the new religion.

Despite their geographic diversity, the arts and crafts of the Near East, which spread rapidly along the region's extensive trade routes, share many salient features. This exhibition focuses on the dominant art and craft traditions of the Islamic world and how their materials and design transformed the fabric of ordinary life in the Near East.



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SCRIPT

The Islamic tradition of the art of the book had its beginnings in the belief that the Koran is the direct word of God, given written form by the prophet Mohammed. The Islamic passion for elaborate Arabic calligraphy—often incorporating floral and geometric patterns—flows from this reverence for the word, as well as from iconoclastic religious customs that forbade human and animal representations in art. Elevated to a sacred art by the virtuosity of professional scribes, holy men, artists, and craftsmen, Islamic calligraphy evolved into an essential part of Near Eastern décor, and can be seen in every facet of the Islamic world and its cultural artifacts, including paintings, tiles, textiles, architecture, metalwork, ceramics, and carpets.



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CARPETS

In a region of harsh climates and austere landscapes, the art of weaving and textile design has had a long, rich history. For centuries, ingeniously crafted curtains, carpets, tents, garden enclosures, and other textile works have lent their warmth, shade, and visual flair to homes and other sites, whether in urban settings, rural villages, or nomads' camps. Islamic prayer rugs, whose vibrant colors and elaborate designs were derived partly from illuminated manuscripts, have long been a fixture of Muslim religious life and are particularly prized by Westerners as collectibles.

7. Egypt or Syria, *Bottle*, 7th - 8th century, glass. Gift of Drs. Joseph B. and Omayma Touma.
8. Iran, Seljuk, *Lamp*, 12th-13th century, bronze. Gift of Drs. Joseph B. and Omayma Touma.
9. Iran, *Manuscript Page Firman*, November-December 1881 (Rabbi wwal 1299 A.H), ink and pigment on paper. Gift of Drs. Joseph and Omayma Touma and family.
10. Western Iran, *Rug*, 19th century, wool and cotton. Gift of Drs. Joseph and Omayma Touma and family.



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CERAMICS

The ceramics of the Near East, long influenced by Chinese porcelains, made enormous strides under the Ottoman Turks (1281-1924), whose lavish building projects—palaces, tombs, mosques, etc.—led to rapid artistic and technological innovation. Pottery towns, such as Iznik in Turkey, became famous for their distinctive styles and colors, and, during the height of the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth century, vessels, tiles, and other ceramics achieved an unprecedented vigor and naturalism, whether in the form of dramatic red or blue tile reliefs or in sinuous floral designs incorporating tulips, hyacinths, and undulating scrolls and vines.



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METALWORKS

Metalwork in the Near East—armaments, vessels, religious objects, scientific instruments, etc.—an elegant fusion of utility and artistry, has long lent its burnish and beauty to the textures of daily and religious life at every level of society. Household vessels fashioned from bronze or copper for cooking, serving, or storing food; incense burners; swords; guns; and other objects, were often embellished with dense, lustrous engravings inspired by textiles' floral motifs or by the calligraphic panache of illuminated manuscripts.

ORIENTALISM

The vogue for travel in the nineteenth century, coupled with European colonial expansion, fed the Western fascination with the “Orient”—roughly, the Near East and North Africa. Artists in particular were attracted to the exotic customs, costumes, and religious rituals of the region, and “Orientalist” painting proliferated during this period, providing Europeans with seductive (but reductive) conceptions of the Arab world. Many of these

artists never actually visited the East, instead gleaning their subject matter from travel writings, photographs, and the work of other artists. Hunting parties, market scenes, and portraits of Arab chieftains were favorite subjects, and visually the genre is characterized by intense lighting effects, exotic architecture, and vibrant colors and patterns derived from native crafts.



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11. Iran, *Tile*, 14th century, underglaze-painted fritware. Gift of Drs. Joseph B. and Omayma Touma.
12. Sharaz, Southern Iran, *Begging (kashkul) Bowl*, 18th century, tinned copper. Gift of Drs. Joseph and Omayma Touma and family.
13. Filippo Bartolini, *Preparing for Prayer*, c. 1875, watercolor on paper. Gift of Drs. Joseph B. and Omayma Touma.



The Touma Collection

After 30 years of passionate collecting, Syrian émigrés Drs. Joseph B. and Omayma Touma generously donated nearly 400 works of art to the Huntington Museum of Art. These works—the Touma Collection—date from ancient times to the early twentieth century, and include ceramics, glassworks, rugs, manuscripts, paintings, metalwork, scientific instruments, weaponry, and armor. The Touma Collection celebrates the saga of an immigrant family who prospered in the United States and accordingly gifted their adoptive country with a rich window into their own origins and heritage—which, like those of virtually all Americans today, are rooted in the wonders of other lands and cultures.

14. Iznik, Turkey, Ottoman, *Dish*, 1600-1625, underglaze-painted fritware. Gift of Drs. Joseph and Omayma Touma and family.



About the Curator

Christopher Hatten began working at the Huntington Museum of Art in 1987, serving for many years as director of the museum archives and library. He has curated a variety of exhibitions at the museum, including *Sources of Joy and Laughter: The Art of the Children's Book*, and *It's a Jungle Out There: Folk Art From the Huntington Museum of Art*. He has written extensively about the museum and its collections, including work as principal author for *Mr. Fitz: Herbert Fitzpatrick and the Founding of the Huntington Museum of Art* (2014), and *The Fitzpatrick Society: Twenty-Five Years of Gifts to the Collection* (2015). He holds a graduate degree from The University of Tennessee, Knoxville. He was appointed Senior Curator at the museum in 2015.

About the Huntington Museum of Art



HUNTINGTON
MUSEUM OF ART

Incorporated in 1947 and opened to the public in 1952, the Huntington Museum of Art serves the public as a museum and cultural center and, in the greater community, acts as a presence and advocate for the areas of arts, education, and nature. HMA's mission is furthered by its four commitments: to acquire and display objects of art; provide excellence in education and arts experiences; maintain a plant conservatory and nature trails; and expand its service population. Today, as the only nationally accredited visual art museum of its size in the Tri-State region, HMA encompasses a permanent art collection of more than 16,000 objects, ten exhibition spaces, an interactive education gallery, an art reference library of nearly 27,000 volumes, a 287-seat auditorium, the only tropical and subtropical plant conservatory in the state of West Virginia, a coral reef aquarium, two outdoor sculpture courts, five studio workshops, two miles of hiking trails, and a quarter-mile paved accessible Sensory Trail for the visually impaired.

15. Iran, Qajar, *Covered Vessel*, c. 1860, brass. Gift of Drs. Joseph B. and Omayma Touma. (opposite)



FRONT: Tabriz, Iran, *Rug*, late 19th century, silk. Gift of Drs. Joseph and Omayma Touma and family.

BACK: Iran, Qajar, *Helmet*, 1850-1900, steel damascened with gold and silver. Gift of Drs. Joseph and Omayma Touma and family. (left)
Iran, Qajar, *Shield*, 1850-1900, steel damascened with gold and silver. Gift of Drs. Joseph and Omayma Touma and family. (right)

EXHIBITION SPECIFICATIONS

Number of Works

45 ceramics, glass, rugs, manuscripts, paintings, and metalwork

Organized by

The Huntington Museum of Art,
Huntington, WV

Curator

Christopher Hatten, Senior Curator

Requirements

High security; 2,000 square feet

Participation Fee

Please inquire

Shipping

IA&A makes all arrangements;
exhibitors pay outgoing shipping
costs within the contiguous US

Booking Period

12 weeks

Tour

September 2021 – October 2024

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Dr. Walter B. Denny and Sue D'Auria

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