About the Exhibition

*Beauty and Belief: Crossing Bridges with the Arts of Islamic Culture* is a journey through Islamic visual culture from the seventh century onward, including works by contemporary artists. It features over 250 objects from 41 lenders in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East—objects that would have been at home in royal palaces as well as in the everyday lives of common people. Some of the works of art have never been seen in the United States, and it is the first time that all of these objects meet in one place.

After the exhibition concludes at BYU it will travel to three other venues:

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Gallery Themes*

The Project Director Dr. Sabiha Al Khemir’s choice of themes in each of the galleries is key to understanding the message of the exhibition. The concepts of the three main sections—The Word, Figures and Figurines, and Pattern—are interconnected throughout the belief system of the Islamic world. The same aesthetic and cultural principles govern all three categories of Islamic art. In fact, they are often intertwined, with calligraphy taking figurative shape and figures becoming decorative patterns. Leading from one section to another in the galleries are “bridges,” highlighting objects that reveal the word, figures, and patterns in fascinating combinations.

Introduction

The Word

✦ The Word Omnipresent
✦ The Word in Architectural Space
✦ The Voice of the Object
  ● Healing and Protection
  ● Timeless Wisdom

Bridge from Calligraphy to Figurative

Figures and Figurines

✦ In the Fabric of Everyday Life
✦ The Entertaining Didactic
✦ Creatures of the Imagination
✦ The Mystical

Bridge from Figurative to Pattern

Pattern

✦ Timeless Garden
✦ Arabesque
✦ Geometry
✦ The Word
✦ A Rhythm of Repetition
✦ No Beginning No End

*The following material is derived largely from Dr. Al Khemir’s Beauty and Belief exhibition catalogue
“Beauty and Belief invites visitors to a world of a wondrous beauty that spills across the centuries in an expression from one of humanity’s great civilizations.”

–Sabiha Al Khemir

The revelation of the Qur’an took place in Arabia starting in 610 CE. By 715 the map of the Muslim world spread west to Europe and east to Asia. The magnitude of the geographical scale of the Islamic world, spanning continents, reflects the rich diversity embraced by Islamic Culture.
Timeline of Key Events in the Islamic World

**622** Following religious persecution, Muhammad and his followers leave the city of Mecca to settle in Medina. Muhammad gathers followers from surrounding cities and subsequently defeats Meccan armies.

**630** Muhammad and 60,000 Muslims take control of Mecca, making it the spiritual center of Islam and re-dedicating the Kaaba to the worship of God. All Muslims pray facing the direction of this cube-shaped building built by Abraham, and are advised to make a pilgrimage to this holy site.

**632** Muhammad dies in Medina shortly after completing his final pilgrimage to Mecca.

**640** Muhammad begins receiving divine revelation and preaching monotheism, the belief that there is only one God. These revelations comprise the Qur’an, the holy book of scripture for Muslims.

**661–750 Umayyad Dynasty** Under the Umayyad Dynasty, the center of power shifts from Arabia to Syria. Damascus is the capital, Arabic becomes the official language, and the Islamic world begins to unify. Umayyad expansion extends to North Africa and Spain in the west and to Central Asia and India in the east.

**705** The Great Mosque at Cordoba is built in Spain and becomes a showcasing achievement of Islamic architecture. This mosque is known for its vast interior and polychrome arches.

**750–1258 Abbasid Dynasty**

**750** The Al-Ashar Mosque and University is built by the Fatimids in Cairo. It is one of the oldest continuously run universities in the world and is acclaimed for its scholarship in Islamic law and Arabic studies.

**785** The Great Mosque of Damascus is constructed, one of the earliest examples of monumental religious architecture in the Islamic world. It employs a court and hypostyle prayer hall, which become the standard for mosque architecture.

**1071–1194 Seljuks in Power**

**1095** The Crusades begin as a campaign by Christian military powers to re-capture the holy sites in Jerusalem. A series of crusades continues throughout the 12th and 13th centuries, exposing Westerners to the culture of the Middle East. Many commodities, including textiles and spices, ignite trade networks between Europe and the Near East.

**1258** In 1258, Genghis Khan leads Mongol invasions terminating lingering Abbasid power, and ending the Abbasid Dynasty. The Great Mosque is dismantled.

**1260–1368 Mongol Empire**

**1299–1922 Ottoman Empire**

**1501–1722 Safavid Dynasty**

**1501** From Tunisia, the Fatimids conquer Egypt in 969. Cairo becomes a cultural capital in the Islamic world and the Fatimids oversee an empire that dominates North Africa.

**1526–1858 Mughal Empire**

**1570** Muhammad the Prophet is born. Muhammad is a merchant by trade known for his skills in diplomacy.

**661–750 Umayyad Dynasty**

**1805–1848** Muhammad Ali modernizes Egypt through his policies and military campaigns, establishing the Ayyubid Sultanate (1171-1260) in Egypt. Muhammad Ali’s policies result in granting Christian travelers access to select pilgrimage sites within Jerusalem.

**19th Century**

**20th Century**

**2000** Many European countries occupy and colonize claims in Africa, seizing control over national resources and key ports. France maintains a heavy presence in Algeria, Tunisia, Senegal, and Lebanon; Britain is involved in ports. In 1830, France occupies Algeria.

**2005** In 1956, France leaves Algeria, marking the end of European colonialism in the region.

**2012** Many Muslim countries gain independence and eject Western ruling powers, establishing the Arab Spring in 2012, where intellectual scholarship and scientific investigation flourish.
Glossary

Allah
Word for God

al-Asma al-Husna
The ninety-nine names of God are the specific attributes by which Muslims regard God and which are described in the Qur'an.

Arabesque
A kind of ornament based on a stylized plant form of intertwining stems, leaves, and flowers that can be extended ad infinitum

Aya
Verse from the Qur'an

Barakah
The beneficent force from God that flows through the physical and spiritual spheres as prosperity, protection, and happiness. Creations endowed with barakah, such as physical objects, places, and people, can transmit the flow of spiritual presence from God to other creations of God.

Batin/ al-batin
The invisible, or underlying dimension

Buraq
A mythical steed that transported the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Jerusalem and back. This creature from the heavens is described as a white animal, half-mule, half-donkey, with wings on its sides. In some traditions it became a steed with the head of a woman and the tail of a peacock.

Dervish
A member of one of the Muslim ascetic orders, who renounces earthly goods and is known for his austerity

Dhahir/ al-dhahir
The visible or apparent; the manifest

Dhikr
Invocation for the remembrance of God, a form of prayer consisting of the constant repetition of a name or formula

Hadith
Collection of sayings and deeds attributed to the Prophet Muhammad

Hajj
Annual pilgrimage to Mecca

Hijra
Migration of Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina in 622, marking the beginning of the Islamic calendar

Ka’bah
A cube-shaped building in Mecca; the most sacred site in Islam

Kashkul
A beggar’s bowl used by a dervish to collect alms

Kiswa
Textile covering the Ka’bah, with Qur’anic inscriptions embroidered in gold silk

Kufic
An angular Arabic script with clear vertical and horizontal lines, developed in the seventh century; it is named after the city of Kufa in Iraq, from which the style is believed to have originated.

Kuttab
A school for teaching children the Qur’an

Madrasa
Any type of educational institution, secular or religious

Mecca
Birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad and the location of the Ka’bah

Mihrib
Prayer niche in the wall of a mosque that indicates the qibla

Mizan
The Arabic word for balance; it refers to the metaphorical pursuit of justice and harmony in all human endeavors. The term mizan, which appears in the Qur’an, has been interpreted as the concept by which God created nature in a balance. It is mankind’s responsibility to maintain this equilibrium through wise governance and sound personal conduct.

Mosque
A place of worship for followers of Islam

Muqarnas
Developed in the tenth century, architectural ornamentation composed of tiers of niche-like elements resembling stalactites or honeycombs

Naskh/Naskhi
The most commonly used Arabic cursive script developed in the tenth century, it means “copying” and is legible and clear. This small script has thin lines and round letter shapes that allow for faster copying of texts, mainly the Qur’an.

Qibla
Sacred direction of the Ka’bah in Mecca—the direction toward which a Muslim faces while praying
Qur’an
Literally meaning “the recitation,” the Qur’an is the central religious text of Islam, which Muslims consider the verbatim word of God

Salat
One of the Five Pillars of Islam, this practice of ritual prayer has prescribed conditions, procedures, and times. Obligatory salat occurs five times each day according to the movement of the sun.

Sawm
Fasting, or abstaining from food, drink, sensuous pleasures, and any practices against Islamic law. Sawm is observed but not confined to the Islamic holy month of Ramadan and is one of the Five Pillars of Islam.

Shahadah
The Muslim declaration of faith in Tawhid and the acceptance of Muhammad as God’s prophet, this Pillar of Islamic faith reads: “la ilaha illallah, Muhammad rasulallah.”

Sibha
A string of prayer beads which is used by Muslims to keep track of counting in tasbeeh.

Simurgh
A mythical flying creature, this figure can be found in all periods of Persian art and literature. Depicted as a winged animal in the shape of a gigantic bird, it is inherently benevolent and unambiguously female.

Sunni Islam
The largest denomination of Islam, the Sunni followers believe that the leadership of the Ummah should be a position to which one is elected by the religious leaders of the community. Sunni refers to the sunnas, or traditions and interpretations of the Qur’an.

Sufism
Inner, mystical dimension of Islam

Sura/Surat
A chapter of the Qur’an

Tasbeeh
A form of dhikr that involves repetitively chanting the praise of God

Tawaf
Circumambulation of Muslims around the Ka’bah, one of the rituals of pilgrimage

Tawhid
One of the fundamental concepts in Islam; belief in monotheism or the Oneness of God

Shi’a Islam
Second largest denomination of Islam, the followers of Shi’a Islam believe that leadership of the Ummah should be dependent on direct lineage from Muhammad. Shi’a means “party of Ali.”

Tiraz
Fabric with woven, embroidered, or painted inscriptions, made as luxury textiles for the elite. They usually contained the caliph’s name and titles, and sometimes the date and workshop of manufacture. The term is also used to designate the technique of tapestry making.

Tughra
A distinctive and intricately executed seal or monogram; a calligraphic emblem included in all official documents as a symbol of the sultan’s authority

Ummah
Muslim community

Zakat
One of the Five Pillars of Islam, this practice involves giving a portion of one’s wealth to charity (alms).
The Journey

What Makes Islamic Art Islamic?

As you embark upon your journey through this exhibition, keep in mind the following keys that will unlock the doors to discovery:

• The makers of Islamic art are essentially anonymous; their purpose in creating these objects is for the worship of God, an act of devotion, or a tool for asking forgiveness. Artists are essentially vehicles through which the creativity of God is made manifest.

• Just as the Ummah, or Muslim community, is unified not by geography or nationality but by faith and culture, so we see the objects of this exhibition reflecting a coherent visual language that reaches beyond the boundaries of geography and time. Despite the diversity of the Islamic world, certain artistic patterns seem to universally reverberate throughout the centuries of Islamic culture.

• The objects of the exhibition are made from a variety of substances, including earthenware, glass, paper, metal, ivory, wood, stone, and silk. Artists, however, did not think in terms of a hierarchy of materials according to their monetary value. In other words, earthenware was as precious as silk, and each were accorded equal dedication and devotion. Why? Because God loves beauty, and the act of transforming raw materials into something beautiful was an act of devotion whether simple or monumental.

• Islamic art does not subscribe to the notion of “art for art’s sake.” Many objects are meant to be used in everyday life as a reminder of cultural values and a declaration of faith. Although today these museum pieces are separated from their original functions and cultural contexts—they no longer carry food or water, etc.—they do carry forth the way in which their makers and owners viewed their religion and their world.

• Except for the objects created specifically for use in the mosque, most of these works are not considered to be “sacred” in the traditional sense. However, because Islamic belief responds to the manifestations of God everywhere in life, even everyday objects have the capacity to carry spiritual meaning. It is the inseparable link in Islamic thought between Beauty and Belief that makes this possible.

• The objects in this exhibition are primarily joyful. They are created neither to judge nor condemn, but to reveal the artist’s glimpse of paradise as they display their rich, decorative motifs and delightful adornment.

• Abstraction is a salient component of Islamic Art, reflecting both the microcosm and the macrocosm—from the atom to the universe. Abstraction transcends the material world and alludes to the domain of the timeless and unknowable, as God is timeless and unknowable.

• A key principle in Islamic Culture is the belief in al-Dhahir and al-Batin (The Visible and the Invisible). Both the Visible and the Invisible are part of the whole, with everything interconnected. In this exhibition, you will be introduced to only part of the whole Islamic story—only paragraphs of the entire narrative. However, even this fragmentary glimpse will serve as a foundation that has the power to turn sight into insight.
The Purpose of the Exhibition

The ultimate purpose of Beauty and Belief is to build bridges and bring cultures together as we experience the visual language of Islamic Culture. Accordingly, this exhibition guide will emphasize three main areas of inquiry:

Beauty: Understanding the artistic significance and merit of the individual art objects and recognizing the overarching coherent visual language spoken throughout the centuries—whether in monumental architectural structures or everyday objects.

Belief: Appreciating the way in which the objects are woven into the fabric of Islamic Culture and worship, and perceiving how these objects reflect the shared Islamic view of the world and carry the spirit of Islamic Culture across the globe.

Crossing Bridges: Recognizing the significance of these objects from a world view and the way in which they interconnect with other global communities; Furthermore, sharpening our own perceptions of the world in which we live.

Note: The audiovisual elements throughout the galleries also enable visitors to engage with the objects on a deeper level, allowing them to discover details and meanings not immediately apparent.
**Beauty of the Object**

This unusually large calligraphic scroll is inscribed mainly in Arabic, but also includes Persian. The scroll contains pious inscriptions with verses from the Qur’an, sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, invocations, and proverbs. Two parts of the scroll have been identified. One part was probably produced in India, where Persian was spoken, and the other part was produced in Damascus in 1417 CE by followers of a Sufi (mystic) order.

**An Expression of Belief**

Some of the verses of this calligraphic scroll are esoteric and impenetrable, perhaps purposely so. Their highly symbolic nature points to the higher purposes of God that cannot be comprehended by man—the realm of al-Batin, or the Invisible. In the gallery, projected above the scroll, is a detail with the Qur’anic phrase translated “God the Creator of Everything.” Calligraphed in a continuous, unbroken line, the detail symbolizes the infinite nature of God and His creations and that everything is interconnected.

**Crossing Bridges**

In Islamic Culture, God, who is unknowable, cannot be shown as a figure or person. Here, God’s eternal nature is revealed through the imagery of an unbroken line, winding in elegant patterns back upon itself.

- How do other religions and cultures symbolically depict the object(s) of their worship?
- What examples of non-figurative visual imagery showing the nature of God are you familiar with?

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**Calligraphic Scroll**

Ink, watercolor, and gold on paper, 14th–15th century, Syria or India, W. 36.6 cm L. 800 cm. The Al-Sabah Collection, Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah, Kuwait LNS 84 MS
**Beauty of the Object**

As you view the various fragments exhibited in this introductory case, notice especially the tile mosaics, assembled from cut sections of fired and glazed earthenware slabs. These mosaics are typical of the technique, geometric design, and multicolored palette of Spain and Morocco. The walls of the Alhambra Palace in Granada, Spain (completed 1391 CE), for example, are embellished extensively with this kind of tile work.

**An Expression of Belief**

The particular pattern on the mosaic fragment (left) is based on the division of a circle into sixteen equal sections to create a radiating motif called *shamsa* (sun). The pattern of this fragment would have covered huge surfaces and could be extended indefinitely, perhaps alluding to the infinite nature of God. Such endlessly repeated patterns convey a sense of timelessness—the eternal perspective one might contemplate while embarking upon life’s journey. Furthermore, just as these fragments are only “part of the whole,” Islamic belief perceives human beings as only “part of the whole” of God’s creations, with all of us being interconnected.

**Crossing Bridges**

Dr. Al Khemir intentionally begins the exhibition with a case containing many fragments—mosaics, earthenware pieces, and manuscripts. In fact, every work of art in the exhibition, however complete, still represents only a fragment of the story being told. Each object is part of a much larger picture, conveying the idea that even the most astute patron will see only parts of the whole. It is upon these “parts” that bridges to greater understanding can be built.

* To what extent does art have the power to build bridges, heal afflictions, and lead to greater empathy among people?
This particular prayer rug was produced for the Ottoman court. Its stylized floral decoration is typical of the repertoire of sixteenth-century Ottoman art and is found in various media such as ceramics and manuscript illumination.

Across the gallery from the prayer rug is a parokhet, or Torah curtain, made to hang in front of the cupboard containing the Torah scrolls in a synagogue. It is similar in many respects to the prayer rug, indicating the shared aesthetic sensibilities of those immersed in Islamic Culture as it expanded across the globe.

**An Expression of Belief**

An Islamic prayer rug symbolizes a spiritual oasis that can sanctify any location and ensure the cleanliness required for prayer. This prayer rug depicts a Mihrab—a prayer niche in the wall of all mosques that indicates the sacred direction of Mecca toward which all Muslims face while praying. The stylized floral decoration of the wide border and the arch suggest Paradise, and the hanging lamp is a reference to the light which emanates from God.

**Crossing Bridges**

The Torah curtain shows an inscription in Hebrew combined with an Ottoman design typical of Islamic prayer rugs. The inscription reads: “This is the Gate of the Lord: Through it the Righteous Enter” (Psalm 118:20). At the center of the curtain is a chalice symbolizing the menorah (candelabrum), decorated with nine hanging lamps. The iconography of arch and lamps is shared symbolism between Muslims and Jews, alluding to the gate of heaven and Divine light.

- What other world religions use light and its manifestations as sacred symbols?
- How does the obvious cultural exchange between Muslims and Jews suggest the possibility of acceptance and mutual respect among all people of faith?
Along with the prerequisite of reading and writing in Classical Arabic, learning and memorizing passages from the Qur’an begins with practice on this kind of board in the Kuttab (Qur’anic school). The text is written with a bamboo pen and ink made with soot, then washed away once the verses are memorized. Learning begins with the short Suras (chapters of the Qu’ran), and as competency increases the Suras become longer. In some parts of the Muslim world, when the Qur’an is fully memorized, the tablet is decorated by the teacher as a kind of reward.

It is believed that because all material is subject to disintegration, the best place to keep the Qur’an is in the heart, and that if the Qur’an is memorized by many it is more likely to be preserved. According to Islamic tradition, the Qur’an is kept in lahw mahfudh (a preserved tablet in heaven). Even though a heavenly tablet would be beyond comparison with a tablet in Qur’anic schools, the concept of the tablet remains significant and is deeply rooted in Islamic culture. The more often the board is used after the ink is washed off, the more it gains spiritual value.

The learning and understanding of sacred writings is key to dedicated worship in all major religions and usually begins during childhood.

- What is it about the nature of a child that is especially receptive to learning religious doctrine?
- By what methods are children most effectively taught such truths?
- How is it that sacred script seems to increase in spiritual value the more it is used?
The Word Omnipresent

For Muslims, the sacred text of the Qur’an is the literal word of God. Arabic, the language of the Qur’an, holds a special significance because it is the language that carries God’s words. Regardless of the native language spoken, the fact that Muslims everywhere are taught to read the Qur’an in Arabic is a unifying force throughout the Islamic world.

Arabic is a Semitic language, written from right to left and consisting of twenty-eight basic letters. Seventeen different letter shapes exist, with dots added to create others. These letters are used in a number of languages, including Persian, Berber in North Africa, Urdu in Pakistan, Kurdish in Iraq and Iran, and various languages in Indonesia and Malaysia.

Because of the emphasis placed on the Qur’anic word, the practice of calligraphy is considered a noble endeavor in Islamic culture—an act of piety that will be rewarded in heaven. Since the word is at the heart of the visual language of Islamic art, calligraphy permeates all aspects of artistic expression. As shown in this section of the exhibition, calligraphy appears on virtually all types of surfaces—from clothing and furnishings to everyday household items and building facades.

The Qur’an was initially transmitted through oral tradition; but once committed to pen, the writing of the word of God became a passionate preoccupation that developed into a sophisticated art form. While respecting the rules of tradition, calligraphers experimented endlessly with new styles worthy of carrying God’s words, the letters themselves becoming the vessels of sacred meaning. Calligraphers sought rhythm, harmony, and proportion in their visual prayers, with no limit to the variety of forms into which the embellished word could evolve. Whether sharp and angular (Kufic), rounded, or elongated; whether carved, incised, painted, or woven; calligraphy holds the power to transform an everyday object into a sacred emblem endowed with meaning.
Beauty of the Object

This kashkul, or begging bowl, is made from a coconut shell that probably originated in the islands of the Indian Ocean and ultimately washed ashore in southern Iran. The surface is carved in relief with elegant calligraphy—inscriptions that include verses from the Qur’an as well as poetry by the mystic poet Sa’di that praises the Prophet Muhammad.

An Expression of Belief

A kashkul is carried—often hanging from a chain—by a dervish, who practices a form of Islam (Sufi) that renounces all worldly possessions. In Iranian culture there is a belief that ‘Ali, the Prophet’s son-in-law, used to leave kashkuls filled with food for the poor. The kashkul tradition is still observed among the Sufis.

The long voyage of the coconut, out of which the kashkul is made, is imbued with symbolic significance. From the Seychelle Islands to the shores of Iran, this object, like man, is carried on a metaphorical journey in the ocean of mystic knowledge until it arrives at its destination.

Crossing Bridges

One of the Arabic inscriptions on this kashkul refers to God as The Forgiver (al-Ghaffar), The Compassionate (al-Rahman), and The Provider (al-Razzaq). As attested to by the nature of the begging bowl, good people are expected to provide for the needy among them. In fact, one of the Five Pillars of Faith in Islam is almsgiving (zakat)—also a tenet of most religions throughout the world.

Can you think of a single world culture that fails to consider easing the burden of the less fortunate to be a noble responsibility among its citizens?

What kinds of programs does your community sponsor for the poor?
Islamic tradition ascribes ninety-nine names to God, enumerating some of His limitless attributes. These three finials must have originally been part of a set of ninety-nine, each with one of the names of God. The finials probably crowned a grille in a shrine, creating a continuous pattern where the negative space between finials echoes the positive shape of the finial itself. The Arabic inscriptions are left in reserve against various backgrounds, one of which is comprised of floral arabesques.

These three finials describe three distinct characteristics of God. One can be translated “O Originator (ya mubdi)—the One who started the human being, the One who created him,” referring to God the Creator. Another crest considers the omniscient, watchful nature of deity (ya raqib); and the third reveals God as the Sustainer (ya muqit), presumably of life and all His creations.


How might some of these virtues correspond with the attributes that we should all cultivate as we become better citizens and more compassionate human beings?
The artist, Parviz Tanavoli, is celebrated as one of Iran’s significant modern sculptors. His numerous statues of “Heech,” meaning “nil” in Persian, have received considerable popular acclaim among Iranians. Although historically calligraphy had appeared primarily on two-dimensional surfaces, Tanavoli adds a third dimension in the form of a graphically dynamic bronze sculpture. Paradoxically, the solid representation of “nothing” has the substance and movement of an animate figure. The bronze metal breathes additional life into the reflective patina.

**An Expression of Belief**

Although the connotations of “nothing” in Western thought are largely negative, its meaning in Iranian mysticism transcends any pessimism. “Heech” is a celebration, not a negation. It is a symbol of life, devoid of despair and hopelessness. It may even allude to that calm place of nothingness in our minds as we meditate in quiet solitude, where all the cares of the world seem to slip away.

**Crossing Bridges**

- How might you consider “nothing” as a positive notion?
- If you were an artist, how might you represent “nothing” visually?
- How would you imbue your “nothing” with life, joy, and spontaneity, as did Parviz Tanavoli?
- Throughout the history of man’s creative endeavors, can you think of examples of calligraphy employed as sculpture? (for example, Robert Indiana’s Love sculpture)
Beauty of the Object

As you admire the many examples of the Qur’an in this section of the exhibition—from Ethiopia to Spain to China—notice the variety of calligraphic styles and the profusion of rich embellishments that adorn these sacred texts. The Blue Qur’an, for example, makes use of luxurious colored vellum and paper rare in the Islamic world, on which striking gold letters are inscribed. The Kufic script, which became popular for transcribing the Qur’an as early as the late eighth century, gives the Qur’an a sense of austerity and purity with its elongated angularity and punctuated rhythmic structure. Diacritical marks, which are important for differentiating vowels, are deliberately absent in the Blue Qur’an because the reader is expected to know the Qur’an by heart.

An Expression of Belief

In the Qur’an it is written, “If the sea were ink for [writing] the Words of my Lord, surely, the sea would be exhausted before the Words of my Lord would be finished, even if we brought [another sea] like it for its aid” (Qur’an 18:109). The Qur’an, the most sacred text of Islam, is believed to be the literal word of God as revealed through the angel Gabriel, through Muhammad, over a period of approximately twenty-three years beginning in 610 CE. At that time Muhammad was forty years old, and he spent the rest of his life gradually obtaining these revelations until his death in 632 CE.

Crossing Bridges

As with most sacred texts throughout the world, the importance of God’s words is accentuated by the lavishly decorated settings in which they are couched. Copying the sacred text is seen as a pious act of devotion to which calligraphers and scholars were willing to devote their lives. Throughout history man has attempted, perhaps in vain, to provide a setting and abode worthy to house the precious words of their God.

Can you think of other vocations that might require and inspire this level of dedication and commitment?

Is there anything in your own life that demands such allegiance and resolve?
Beauty of the Object

The use of inscriptions and calligraphy in public spaces, both sacred and secular, began as early as the seventh century. For example, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (completed in 692 CE), the earliest major Islamic structure, has Qur’anic inscriptions circling the arcade both inside and outside. The choice of inscription used on architectural structures is often determined by the function of the space on which it is written. Some structures are literally draped in calligraphic inscriptions.

Crossing Bridges

The analogy of doors being opened as applicable to one’s journey through life is shared by many religions and cultures. In Christianity, for example, if one knocks, the door will be opened. What is behind the door seems, universally, to be blessings from on high—in the form of answered prayers, greater wisdom, and perhaps the opening of doors within us that lead to the cultivation of our best selves.

An Expression of Belief

A pair of door panels from sixteenth-century Turkey are decorated with an Arabic inscription that reads, “O Opener of [all] the doors, Open for us the best door.” This text serves as a reminder that it is indeed God who provides the opportunities in our lives. The inscription is also an invocation asking that God grant us the blessing of uncovering the very richest of these opportunities laid out before us. As one enters the doors of the structure upon which these panels rest, the meaning of the text is further emphasized by the physical act of opening the door. And in hoping that the “best” door has been opened, the experience within will probably be enhanced as well.

Can you think of other ways that “doors” are used symbolically in world literature and the arts?

If you were to write a message on the door of your own home, what would it say?
The belief in the power of the word and its divine properties leads to a belief that the word has the power to heal and protect. This power gives voice to the objects in this section—a voice that shares blessings, good wishes, and timeless wisdom across the centuries. This mirror, for example, is decorated with a pair of sphinxes, symbols of protection in the Ancient world. When looking into the mirror, one’s face is reflected in the surface that is inscribed with sacred Qur’anic text, thus invoking God’s blessings to be protected. The repetition of the words on the mirror is perhaps suggestive of a chant invoking the remembrance of God (dhikr).

The Turkish bowl, covered in Ottoman inscriptions, is also associated with healing and protection. Many cultures around the world have viewed tortoises as symbols of steadfastness and longevity. The tortoise shell itself was sometimes used as medicine in powdered form, and this bowl would have originally held a drink meant for medicinal purposes.

The sacred word seems to be endowed with supernatural power that can bring healing and peace to both body and soul. It is not surprising, then, that Muslims would surround themselves with such words embedded in the objects of everyday life. The calligraphy gives voice to such objects as they serve to continuously remind believers of God’s power to heal and protect.

There is no denying the power of the word. In some cultures, a curse is believed to have the power to maim; in others, chanting wards off evil spirits. Many believe that gaining control over one’s employment of words allows one to achieve ascendancy over the baser self.

To what extent does our belief in the power of the word affect what we say and write?
**Beauty of the Object**

The design of this vessel is marked by duality, both in its composition and its two-color ornamentation. One side is covered with a floral decoration, motifs that are typical of the fifteenth-to-sixteenth-century Ottoman style in Tunisia. The neck is covered with stylized patterns, including chevron bands that mark a punctuating rhythm. The central floral component is a single, stylized leaf surrounded by lush foliage. The other side of the vessel is completely different, covered instead with calligraphy.

**An Expression of Belief**

This drinking vessel once inhabited the sanctuary of Sidi Mahrez, the patron saint of the city of Tunis. Sidi Mahrez, who died in 1022, was an ascetic who is said to have fostered craftsmanship and was protective of the Jewish community. The entrance hall of the Sidi Mahrez Mausoleum (sqifa) has served as a refuge for the poor for centuries, and the water in its well is believed to be blessed and is sought for a variety of needs.
The simple material of this tenth-century earthenware vase belies its subtle beauty and sophisticated design. The pronounced shape of the vase is accentuated by the calligraphy's elongated, vertical strokes. Kufic script, with its angular geometric shapes painted in black against a buff white ground, creates a striking graphic quality.

Like the vase, the bowl is also slip painted—the technique of painting with liquefied clay—allowing for greater control and precision in executing the calligraphic lines as though they were being written on vellum or paper. As with the vase, limiting the palette of the bowl to ivory and black provides striking contrasts and minimalistic purity.

The inscriptions on the vase and bowl emphasize two desired virtues, modesty and verbal restraint, respectively.

The vase consists of one of the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad: “Modesty is from faith and faith from Paradise.” An essential characteristic of a true Muslim is, indeed, modesty. The saying on the bowl reads, “He who talks much, errs much.” Islamic tradition encourages silence and considers it a sign of wisdom and virtue in one’s quest for the Divine.

People often possess visual reminders of the Divine throughout their homes and offices in the form of wise sayings and instructive adages.

Do you possess any such reminders?

What virtues do they call upon?
Beauty of the Object
In Islamic culture, inscriptions on objects are found in the most unlikely places—pen boxes, leaves, and horsehoes, for example. Many are proverbs conveying cultural wisdom; others are warnings against inappropriate behavior. The calligraphy is usually elaborate, highly embellished, and often difficult to decipher. Since the letters need to conform to the shape of the object, they often become elongated and abstracted. On the leaf, for example, the calligraphy molds to the natural contours of the organic object. Leaves such as this were produced in Ottoman Turkey and became especially popular among Sufi (mystic) orders.

Expression of Belief
The inscription on the lid of the pen box reads: “Do not write with your hand except that which will delight you to see on Judgment Day.” Connected to one’s tendency to say too much is one’s propensity toward writing things that will later prove to be an embarrassment, or writing fabrications instead of the truth.

The proverb on the horseshoe issues the warning: “Fear the evil of him whom you have been charitable to.” This rings of the “bite the hand that feeds you” dictum in Western culture. The truism on the leaf wisely reminds us that “The best people are those who do good for other people.” The fragility of the leaf itself stands in stark contrast to the importance of this calligraphic message.

Crossing Bridges
Understanding the processes involved in the creation of a precious art object often enhances our admiration of the work itself. With the natural leaf, for example, the delicate and laborious process involves flattening the leaf, sealing the stenciled inscription with wax, soaking the leaf in an alkaline solution to remove the leaf tissue, and meticulously applying the calligraphy in gold.

We are all involved in the “creative process” at some time in our lives.

To what extent does the intensity of painstaking labor involved in a creative endeavor influence our perception of the value of the finished product?

Is it often more precious if we had to work harder to obtain it?
The ban on figurative imagery is probably one of the most widespread misperceptions about Islamic art. There is a general belief that Islam forbids figurative imagery and that the arts of Islamic Culture are devoid of any figurative representation. However, figurative imagery has existed at all times throughout the Islamic world in all forms of secular art. As seen in this exhibition, figures were integrated into the living spaces and everyday lives of Islamic culture—in the form of pottery, frescoes, woodcarvings, mosaics, textiles, etc., and as part of every conceivable utilitarian object such as scissors and teapots.

When the Prophet Muhammad entered Mecca in 630 CE, he destroyed the 360 idols in and around the Ka’bah. While destroying each idol, Muhammad is said to have recited a verse from the Qur’an: “The truth has come, and falsehood has vanished away . . .” (Qur’an 17:81, Surat al-Isra’). However, the Prophet is believed to have left a portrait of Jesus and Maryam (Mary) intact. The Prophet’s main purpose was to introduce Tawhid, the Oneness of God, not to destroy all images.

In Islam, figurative imagery as an idol or icon is categorically forbidden. However, representation of humans and animals is prohibited only in spaces of worship, where it could be associated with idolatry. There is nothing in the Qur’an that speaks against figurative images in the arts. In Egypt, for example, there is a popular tradition that occurs after pilgrims have returned from Hajj. They commission artists to paint the façades of their houses to display narrative scenes recording and celebrating their pilgrimage to Mecca. Today, figurative images also pervade Islamic culture through movies, photographs, and television.

As you move through the bridge section from “The Word” to “Figures and Figurines,” notice how the animal and human shapes often display a stylistic treatment that is close to calligraphy in spirit. The curvature and sweeping elongations of the forms have a sense of rhythm and abstraction characteristic of the myriad Arabic styles of writing seen in “The Word” galleries.
Beauty of the Object

This type of glass flask is an example of the myriad ways in which figurines are used in domestic settings throughout Islamic culture, and can be traced to Roman times. However, the fact that the flask is mounted on an animal—in this instance a stylized horse-like figure—is a more distinctly Islamic interpretation. The translucent glass flask was probably meant to hold fragrant oil.

The vessel depicts a crowned, seated figure holding a water skin, which functions as a double spout from which liquid can be poured. The technique of painting beneath the glaze gained popularity in the twelfth century. The figure’s facial features and hair locks, as well as a three-dot pattern on the body and face, were painted in black before the whole figurine was covered in a translucent, originally bright turquoise glaze.

An Expression of Belief

The Prophet Muhammad said that “God is beautiful and loves beauty.” This implies that God, the supreme example of beauty, is also the ultimate beholder of beauty. In Islamic art, if the voice of the object conveys something beautiful, it will be pleasing to God. Hence, mortal man’s desire to create things of beauty, and be surrounded by things of beauty, is an extension of his faith—since everything that is beautiful connects with God’s nature.

Crossing Bridges

Incorporated into the fabric of everyday life, these utilitarian objects masterfully combine form and function, beauty and usefulness. Furthermore, although lost to us through the centuries, these figures probably had symbolic meaning, perhaps linked with stories or legends.

How much richer would all of our lives be if the objects surrounding us were infused with beauty and meaning, tradition and heritage?
Beauty and Belief

Illustration from the *Automata of al-Jazari*
Ink and gouache on paper, Farrukh ibn 'Abd al-Latif al-Yaquti al-Maulawi, Syria, dated December 1315, H. 31.5 cm W. 27.0 cm, The al-Sabah Collection, Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah, Kuwait, LNS 17 MS

Beauty of the Object

Although this representation of a water-powered clock is actually a diagram explaining the mechanism of this particular invention, the colors, balanced composition, and embellishments give it an aesthetic quality in its own right. The style of painting—especially the flattened scribe with his almond-shaped eyes and golden halo—is strongly linked to Byzantine tradition. These meter-high water-powered clocks, which became a passion in the Islamic world, would have evoked wonder within the courtly circles that commissioned them. As the scribe automatically rotates, he marks the passage of time with his pen.

Expression of Belief

Time keeping plays an important role in Islamic culture. For example, *Salat* (prayer), one of the Five Pillars of Islam, requires prescribed conditions, procedures, and times. Obligatory *Salat* occurs five times each day according to the movement of the sun. Keeping time is also important in tracking the events and holy days of the Islamic calendar.

Crossing Bridges

Many cultures throughout history have reached their zenith due, in part, to their scientific advancements.

- Can you think of some of the inventions that have advanced certain civilizations to great heights?

Al-Jazari was an engineer in thirteenth-century Iraq who built a large number of mechanical devices that revolutionized engineering. Automatic machines operated by human figurines were one of his original inventions, and he recorded many of them in his *Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices*. Such ingenuity, whether playful or practical, is highly prized in Islamic culture, as in all cultures.
**Beauty and Belief**

**Figures and Figurines and the Entertaining Didactic**

*Queen Shirin Visiting the Sculptor Farhad*

Oil on canvas, Iran (Shiraz), mid 18th century, H. 91.44 cm W. 88.9 cm, Brooklyn Museum, Bequest of Irma B. Wilkinson in memory of her husband, Charles K. Wilkinson, 1997.108.5

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**Beauty of the Object**

This painting, which was shaped to fit a niche in the upper wall of a reception room, is thematically related to the *Shahnama* (The Book of Kings). The *Shahnama* is a renowned national epic, considered to be a definitive work expressing Iran’s cultural identity. This eleventh-century literary masterpiece is composed of sixty thousand couplets by the Persian poet Firdawsi. It is a mythical and historical narrative of Greater Iran (modern-day Afghanistan and Iran) from primordial times to the seventh-century Arab conquest of Persia.

**An Expression of Belief**

The *Shahnama* is comprehensive in its teachings regarding the moral compass of the Islamic world—the worship of one God, morality, patriotism, love of family, helping the poor, justice, the pursuit of wisdom, chivalry, forgiveness, hard work, kindness, and knowledge. It also recounts the creation of the world and the inception of civilization with its great discoveries such as fire, metallurgy, law, and the arts.

**Crossing Bridges**

The *Shahnama* has been illustrated again and again over the centuries and still serves as a source of inspiration, particularly for Iranian artists. It is replete with several hundred years of heroes and monsters, villains and mythological creatures. It is the journey of a culture through the mythical, heroic, and historical earmarks of the ages.

- Can you think of similar epics in Western literature?
- What types of artworks have these classics inspired?
**Beauty of the Object**

Islamic culture has a rich tradition of storytelling. Its didactic and entertaining narratives often feature animals, plants, and other forces of nature that are endowed with both human qualities and extraordinary powers. The theatrical scene showing bear and monkey unfolds as the bear takes his friend to see the monkey doctor because the monkey’s eyesight is failing. The doctor, who is known for his devious ways, makes his patient climb a tree in order to be examined. It appears, however, that the unethical treatment results in the monkey falling from his perch! The delicate painting shows the figures against a gold backdrop, while the sky hangs like a swag.

Islamic scholars translated many early treatises from Greek and Latin into Arabic. As the didactic narrative became a popular genre, even scientific texts employed lavish didactic illustrations that made the subject more enjoyable. For example, a copy of Ibn Bakhtishu’s *Manafi’ al-Hayawan* (The Benefits of Animals), produced in the early fourteenth century, has beautiful illustrations drawn with calligraphic elegance and precision.

**An Expression of Belief**

Fables often illustrate a moral lesson that emphasizes righteous living. For example, the witty narrative from the *Sulwan al-Muta* about the bear and monkey encourages rulers to reign with justice and magnanimity by applying the precepts of Islam, and quotes from both the Qur’an and the Hadith (a collection of sayings and deeds attributed to the Prophet Muhammad).

**Crossing Bridges**

Whether through fables or scientific treatises, learning is regarded as an ethical endeavor in Islamic culture. The Prophet Muhammad is believed to have said, “Seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim (male and female).” Another saying attributed to the Prophet is, “Seek knowledge even as far as China.” The Prophet’s council reveals insight that is applicable in all times and places – that wisdom is not limited to a single people or culture but can be found throughout the world.

- Can you trace the myriad sources of the wisdom and knowledge that you have obtained throughout your life?
Beauty of the Object

The griffin—with the head and wings of a bird and the body of a lion—is one of the most famous Islamic bronze figurines. Wherever its origins—possibly Egypt, Iran, or Spain—it embarked upon an impressive journey over 800 years ago and mysteriously found its way to Pisa, where it still resides today. During renovation work on the cathedral, it was discovered that the Pisa griffin was, in fact, Islamic, as indicated by Arabic inscription on the body of the figurine.

An Expression of Belief

The Kufic inscription on the griffin reads: “Perfect benediction, complete well-being, perfect joy, eternal peace and perfect health, and happiness and good fortune for the owner.” It is fitting that such a majestic creation as this would carry wishes of such magnitude. Mythological creatures of this nature—a composite of various animals endowed with their respective strengths—is an ancient tradition inherited by the Islamic world. Many such hybrid figures functioned as symbolic guardians, just as the Pisa griffin became the sentinel for the great cathedral. We, as humans, can look upon their anthropomorphic attributes with respect, admiration, and a willingness to emulate their strengths in our own lives.

Crossing Bridges

We’ve all heard the adage that things are not always as they seem. This is especially true of the arts of Islamic culture, which are often layered with a multiplicity of meanings. For example, on the upper part of the Griffin’s legs are cartouches containing bird and feline images—figures within the Griffin figure itself. Furthermore, recent x-rays of the Griffin have revealed a hidden vessel that may have once produced a roaring sound as the wind blew through it. Such initially hidden elements in works of art serve as a metaphor for the way in which we can learn to approach our lives—with an expectation that upon closer examination, and over time, life’s mysteries will gradually unfold.

For example, how often have you re-read a great piece of literature or watched a classic movie for the second or third time and gleaned new insights and meanings that had previously escaped your attention?
The sweet smell of incense has historically been used to ward off malevolent spirits and as a method of purification. This feline incense burner has a body within which incense is sprinkled on top of embers, and the scented smoke unfurls through the openwork. The two-wick oil lamp also makes visual reference to the feline race, greatly admired for its keen senses, stealth, and agility. The oil lamp stands on its feline feet with light flaring from lotus-shaped wicks and its catlike head protruding from the middle.

The open beak serves as a spout on the crowned peacock pouring vessel. The handle takes the shape of a bird’s neck and head, introducing a fantastical aspect to an essentially naturalistic representation. Notice how the incised lines on the body of the peacock elegantly define its plumage.

These extraordinary creatures play a distinct role in Islamic culture—one that reminds people of the world beyond and that God’s creations are without number. In the oral tradition of Islamic culture, storytellers often begin their tales of supernatural creatures with the expression: “May God be praised for His Creation.” All creatures are subject to God’s power, and despite our limited view in this earthly realm, there are likely a multitude of God’s creations unknown to us.

Why do cultures throughout the world invent such bizarre and incredible creatures as part of their cultural mythology?

Perhaps we are so fascinated with the prodigious gifts given to members of the animal kingdom, we enjoy intermingling them with human characteristics. Furthermore, in relation to our perpetual preoccupation with the “Super Hero,” we delight in creating a champion that is an amalgamation of the supreme attributes of all creation. Another reason for the potent presence of these magical creatures in our cultural mythology may be more spiritual. Perhaps, by projecting our imaginations into unseen worlds, it reminds us that we may one day shake off the confines of mortality and witness, for ourselves, the world beyond.
**Beauty of the Object**

This exquisite painting depicts the Prophet Muhammad’s ascent to heaven. It is marked by rich detail, vivid colors, and swirling dynamism. The Prophet Muhammad is shown at the center of the picture surrounded by angels, some of them carrying guiding lights. Interestingly, some details, such as the angels’ dress and the stylistic treatment of clouds, are inspired by Chinese paintings of the period. This is yet another example of the cross-cultural influences that have inspired Islamic art throughout the centuries.

**An Expression of Belief**

The Persian text above and below the painting creates a frame for the dramatic scene—a window through which we can view the Prophet Muhammad’s mystical “Night Journey” (Isra’ and Mi’raj). According to the Qur’an and the Hadith, during his lifetime he ascended to heaven from Jerusalem riding on the Buraq, a heavenly steed endowed with lightning speed. While on his journey, Muhammad met God and a number of former prophets. He was also instructed about the five daily prayers, which became a pillar of Islam and Islamic Culture. Hence, these daily prayers are closely associated with this heavenly flight, wherein all Muslims have the opportunity, like the Prophet Muhammad, to be in direct communion with God.

**Crossing Bridges**

One of the most compelling unifying forces among three of the world’s notable religions—Islam, Christianity, and Judaism—is the shared heritage of the Prophet Abraham as well as the great prophets before and after him. On Muhammad’s Night Journey, the Buraq, the extraordinary horse on which Muhammad rode, is believed to have also transported the Prophet Abraham many centuries before. Furthermore, Muhammad’s associations with the heavenly angels and God included interviews with the prophets from the time of Adam down to Jesus.

- What impact do you think it would have on mankind’s mutual respect for one another if we shared our common bonds rather than pass judgment on our differences?
The second miniature is from The Treasury of Secrets, a twelfth-century philosophical book in verse by the Persian poet Nizami. Its stories are concerned with choosing a spiritual path in preparation for the afterlife. In this painting, the prince is portrayed in his sumptuous costume, his horse and dog nearby while his attendants watch from afar. The dervish, who looks disheveled and unassuming, is sitting in a ruined building inhabited by birds and snakes.

Mahmud, a prominent eleventh-century Persian ruler. Far from being impressed by the Sultan, the dervish criticized him for his pursuit of worldly riches and his lack of preparation for the afterlife. Replying, the Sultan asked the dervish how prepared he was for his death; in response, the dervish simply laid down and died. The incident illuminates a view of life shared by so many world religions and philosophies—that material wealth has little value in the course of one’s spiritual journey.

In Islamic tradition, the three sentient creations of God in the universe are humans, angels, and jinns. Jinns are especially fascinating supernatural creatures that occupy a parallel world to that of mankind. The Qur’an describes jinns as being made of smokeless flames. They can be virtuous, malevolent, or neutral according to the circumstances. The earliest jinn stories can be read in One Thousand and One Nights—folk tales compiled during the Middle Ages (c. 750 CE - c. 1258 CE).

Can you think of an adaptation of jinns in Western culture? (such as genies, for example)
Beauty of the Object

*Leila and Majnun* is the most popular of all Muslim romances. Although both of these watercolors depict Majnun in a state of lovesick madness, they could not be more different in their artistic approaches. *Majnun at the Ka’bah* is rendered with geometric precision and compositional balance, while *Majnun in the Wilderness* employs a monochromatic and complex array of intertwining lines representing a variety of animals, foliage, and the emaciated Majnun. The classical respose of the former reflects Majnun’s prayerful supplications, while the latter exudes Majnun’s madness and anguish with every dramatic stroke of the brush.

Crossing Bridges
The theme of this seventh-century story, adapted by the twelfth-century Persian mystic poet Nizami, is a universal tale of woe found in world literature throughout all time. Like the story of Romeo and Juliet, for example, it is a tale of romance and loss, a legend of unrequited love. Perhaps Majnun is more in love with the idea of Leila than with the real Leila—a hardship that afflicts all mortals in wanting what cannot be obtained. Like Romeo and Juliet, the star-crossed lovers’ union never takes place. The story ends with the death of both Leila and Majnun, who are buried side by side.

Can you think of any modern-day adaptations of this tale?
Pattern permeates every aspect of Islamic art and life, both sacred and secular. It can be seen on everyday objects and scientific instruments, interwoven with calligraphic inscriptions, and on the intricately decorated ceilings and facades of architectural structures. Based on repeated units of geometric shapes and arabesques, patterns overlap, interlace, and multiply in endless variety on such surfaces as stonework, woodwork, manuscript illuminations, and carpets.

The most salient theme in this section of the exhibition is the way in which pattern points to God. In Islamic art, pattern acts as a mirror of nature by reflecting the inherent rules that reveal the character of God and his creations. At the same time, the notion of pattern is in harmony with the abstract quality of God—that He is beyond representation. Pattern is also intimately linked with numbers, thought to be of Divine origin. The geometric complexities of patterns are associated with the mathematics of the universe, from the subatomic to the cosmic. We see only parts of the patterns due to the limitations of our visual field, yet they can extend forever—a perfect metaphor for the infinite nature of God.

The language of pattern in Islamic art is also a visual representation of the rhythmic incantations involved in the ritual of chanting praises to God. The act of contemplating the harmonious musicality of patterns is deemed to have the capacity to open channels between God and the believer, allowing fleeting contact with the infinite. The vegetal patterns of Islamic art remind the believer of God’s bounteous creations and the gardens of paradise. The omnipresence of pattern in Islamic art is symbolic of the belief in the omnipresence of God.

As you enter the bridge section from “Figures and Figurines” to “Pattern,” notice the way that figural images are now reshaped and transformed into a multitude of lively patterns. The figures literally become the units in the creation of pattern. At the end of the Pattern section, you will view objects that exemplify how calligraphy can also be expressed using the language of pattern.

**Bowl with a Hare**
Incised, white slipped and painted pottery, Aghkand type, Northwest Iran or the Caucasus, 12th – 13th century, H. 11.5 cm Diam. 30 cm, The British Museum, London, 1972.0410.1

**Star Tile**
Fritware, overglaze luster painted with turquoise and cobalt blue, Iran (probably Takht-i Suleyman), circa 1270–1280, Diam. 20 cm D. 1.27 cm, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Art Museum Council Fund, M.68.22.8

**Plate Depicting Simurg**
Earthenware, slip painted, Iran, 10th century H. 12 cm Diam. 34.3 cm (12 cm at base) Benaki Museum, Athens, Greece Ε 39188
Beauty of the Object

The manuscript on the right presents a joyful setting for the words of a prayer using the collage technique. The patchwork of architectural elements, geometry, calligraphy, and floral motifs unite to form a composition that creates the effect of a garden. Stylized trees crown the architectural structure, while inscriptions fit within its arches. The Prophet Muhammad’s footprint is also symbolically represented with flowers covering an entire page, creating a carpet-like effect representing Paradise.

Many of the manuscripts seen in this case employ the arabesque, a pattern derived from plants and flowers. Often the foliage becomes so stylized that it is no longer recognizable as a given species, thus becoming more symbolic than representational.

Crossing Bridges

Although the arabesque is particular to the Islamic world, the name was actually conceived in Europe during the Renaissance. It is a French word, derived from the Italian arabesco, meaning “from the Arabs.” What is so fascinating about this network of intertwined stems, branching into other stems and splitting into new leaves, is its ability to visually symbolize eternity. The organic growth has the potential to proliferate in unending multiplication, a suitable metaphor for the everlasting nature of the Divine.

- How do other world religious visually represent that which never ends?
- How does science represent infinity? (for example, the number eight or the mobius strip)

An Expression of Belief

Patterns in Islamic art and culture usually, to some degree, represent Deity. Patterns, particularly those derived from nature, like the arabesque, remind us of God’s endless creations. Natural patterns also imply the fruitfulness of God’s designs, as seen in Paradise, the ultimate place of Divine presence. The arabesque pattern conveys a sense of heaven’s gardens, forever blooming in timeless profusion.
**Beauty of the Object**

In Islamic Culture, such windows were often used to embellish indoor sitting rooms. Not only did these windows filter natural light, but they graced the interior with colorful patterns reflected from the stained glass. In the evenings, light from inside could also cast enchanting reflections onto the streets of the city. This type of window was popular in the Mamluk period (1250-1517 CE) in Egypt and Syria, both great centers of glass making. Stained glass windows continued to be in vogue with the Ottomans and are still distinctive decorative features of Yemeni architecture.

**An Expression of Belief**

One of the main principles of pattern in Islamic art is the interplay of opposites—full and empty, light and dark, presence and absence. This principle of opposing forces is especially evident in the medium of stained glass, which alternately illuminates and hides in various degrees depending on the source and quantity of light. The Islamic principle of *Batin* (Invisible) and *Dhahir* (Visible) is especially relevant here, as light exposes the natural world but hides that which cannot be seen—God, Himself. The properties of stained glass are also analogous to God’s nature, where the image itself is constant, as God is constant, but the manifestations of its patterns are endless.

**Crossing Bridges**

Light is shared and embraced by many cultures as a symbol of the Divine. Can you think of such examples? Light, although it is not tangible, offers a sense of Divine presence. For many, light is an especially convincing metaphor for God because light is made up of electromagnetic radiation—a form of energy that travels through space. Furthermore, the speed of light, like the presence of Deity, is one of the fundamental constants in nature. Conversely, in many cultures the opposite of light, darkness, represents nefarious activity and evil presence. Even in movies and television the hero traditionally wears white, while the villain is dressed in black. Such stereotypes can be misleading, even harmful, as we recognize, instead, that it is the light within that defines us, not the external appearance.
These textiles are covered in richly woven patterns seemingly derived from the patterns in nature. The delicate designs on the brilliant red textile suggest the crystals of a snowflake. On the tray cover, the pattern of swirling stems, lush leaves, and blooming branches neatly held with ribbon is reminiscent of wreaths—a motif that goes back to ancient Greece and Rome where they represented status and victory. The type of embroidery using gold sequins and wires is still used to decorate traditional bridal costumes in North Africa. This textile, with its striking contrast of gold thread against a black ground, also shows the influence of European Rococo style, where patterns became increasingly ornate and playful.

The patterns of these two textiles, evoking patterns found in nature, seem to gravitate around a central point, just as the earth rotates around the sun. This cosmic application can also be extended to the idea that God is the center of all existence—a continuous circle with no beginning and no end. Likewise, in Islamic thought, God should be the center and focus of our individual lives and activities.

How do you think pattern can be a reflection of nature? Can you think of some of the exquisite patterns found in nature?

Every artist throughout the history of mankind has used the patterns of nature as inspiration—spider webs, honeycombs, snowflakes, sand dunes, crystals, and clouds, for example. New and exciting patterns have also emerged as science has revealed to us the macrocosm through its amazing telescopes, and the microcosm of infinitesimally small quantum structures such as the microscopic alga diatom shown above. The combinations and manifestations of patterns in nature are truly endless.
This rare capital comes from the splendid Madinat al-Zahra, a fortified Islamic palace-city located on the outskirts of Cordoba, Spain. Built between 936 and 940, the complex included ceremonial reception halls, mosques, government offices, gardens, residences, and baths. The type of carved decoration on this capital returns to a Classical pre-Islamic style.

This vase is one of a group of twelve vases from the fourteenth-century Alhambra Palace in the city of Granada, Spain, built by Muslim rulers. The vases were originally positioned in pairs within niches. Their subtle ornamentation in blue, green, yellow, and purple incorporates rich arabesque designs.

The Kufic calligraphy on the vase reads: “There is no God but God” and “Power is to God.” Also, the words Fortune (al-yumn) and Prosperity (al-iqbal) are alternately repeated. A further allusion to Paradise can be seen in the dense design and floral decoration of palms that seamlessly incorporates figures of deer.

The distribution of patterns on the vase—one third for the collar and two thirds for the body—follows an established ratio known as the golden mean. First studied by ancient Greek mathematicians, this proportion, the so-called “rule of the third,” has fascinated intellectuals throughout the world for at least 2,400 years. It can be seen in mathematics, architecture, and music. Leonardo da Vinci’s work on divine proportions led to the employment of the golden ratio in his paintings, such as the Mona Lisa. Nature also abounds in examples of this proportion—the arrangement of branches along the stems of plants, the patterns of the veins in our bodies, the geometry of crystals, and the designs on shells.

Can you think of other manifestations of this ratio in the world around you? (What about the proportions involved in hanging a picture above your couch, or the ratio of pillows to the rest of your bed? Think of your own physical proportions of head to torso and torso to toes.)
Zellij is a terra cotta tile work of chips set into plaster and covered with enamel. The tradition of tile work flourished in Morocco during the Middle Ages and continues today. The geometric interpretations of this style are endless, with the use of the eight-pointed star being especially popular. Such tile work was used to embellish walls, ceilings, fountains, floors, tables, etc.

The Mamluk carpet combines geometric and stylized plant motifs in red, green, and light blue—perhaps metaphors for rubies, emeralds, and sapphires. A rectangular panel on either end of the carpet is filled with patterns of date palm trees alternating with cypress trees. These elements are surrounded by a border of alternating rosettes and diamonds. The suggestion of gemstones and the abundance of plant life is a possible allusion to Paradise.

Of all of the geometric shapes used in Islamic art, stars and octagons are among the most common. It is believed that King Suleyman (Solomon) owned a ring with an eight-pointed star stone, which he used to control the jinns. Furthermore, stars are associated with the cosmos and God’s numberless creations.

The story of the Mamluk soldiers is an inspirational tale repeated throughout history among many cultures, where a downtrodden people ultimately gains ascendency over their oppressors.

Can you think of any such historical examples? Why are we especially drawn to this type of scenario where we root for the underdog?

The Mamluk soldiers were actually slaves, the consequence of a Muslim military practice begun in ninth-century Baghdad where slaves served in battle beside free men. The name “Mamluk” is actually derived from an Arabic word for “slave.” In 1250, the Mamluk generals seized control and established a dynasty that ruled Egypt and Syria until 1517. The slaves had now become the sultans.
With both mirror and tile, we again see the popularity of the star motif in Islamic art. The mirror back reveals a geometric pattern that radiates out from a central star design. The inlaid materials—wood, mother-of-pearl, and green-stained ivory—add to the overall composition in a harmonious blend of colors and textures. During Ottoman times, it was believed that mirrors were to be used only in the daytime; consequently, after sunset the back of the mirror became its face, and its rich decoration was then displayed and enjoyed.

The design of the twelve-pointed tile is structured around a pair of interlaced stars. During the Timurid rule in Greater Iran (1370-1506), such brilliantly glazed blue tiles were used to lavishly adorn architectural structures. The Timurids were great patrons of the arts and constructed many grand buildings.

The complex geometry of pattern in Islamic art points to the mathematics of the universe and its Divine origin—from the subatomic to the cosmic in spectrum. The shapes that make up the patterns are simple—circles, squares, stars, polygons—but the intricacy of their multiplying combinations are a metaphor for God and His infinite nature. In Islamic Thought, as one reflects upon these mesmerizing patterns, a channel can be opened that allows momentary contact with the sacred—a fleeting sense of the sublime.

The star motif on the mirror is a geometric pattern based on the numbers five and ten—a ten-pointed star in the center surrounded by ten five-pointed stars, giving the mirror itself the shape of a decagon. Mathematically, the five- and ten-fold geometry, frequent in Islamic art, connects with the golden section and the Fibonacci numbers found throughout the natural world and symbolizes the harmony and unity of all life. It is astounding to recognize the degree to which mathematics plays an important and symbolic role in the patterns of Islamic art. Actually, the pure beauty of numbers continually surrounds us.

Can you think of ways in which mathematics plays a role in your daily life? (Music, for example, can be thought of as numbers made audible.)
Beauty and Belief

Window Frame
Carved, decorated, turned and painted wood, Morocco (Meknes), 18th – 19th century, ’Alawid, H. 177 cm W. 112 cm, Ministère de la Culture du Royaume du Maroc, Rabat, Dar Jamai Museum, Meknes, 63.4.97

Hispano-Moresque Panel
Silk lampas, Spain (probably Granada), late 14th century, H. 103.2 cm W. 37.1 cm, Saint Louis Art Museum, Museum Purchase, 52:1939

Beauty of the Object
The silk panel, probably produced in one of the renowned silk-weaving centers in Spain, displays an array of complex geometric patterns woven in an interplay of striking colors. Several designs would have been stored on the draw loom at the same time, so the weaver could easily shift from one design to another on the same piece. The patterns are arranged in horizontal planes featuring the eight-pointed star as a key element.

This external window frame would have overlooked the courtyard of a wealthy nineteenth-century house. The geometric design, based on the eight-pointed star, is enhanced by a floral pattern and latticework. The art of carved wood latticework is a complex technique, demanding a high degree of accuracy in assembling the tiny pieces of wood to make the patterns.

Expression of Belief
In the larger bands of the silk panel, Kufic calligraphy is woven in black against a red ground, repeating the word “beatitude” (al-ghibtah). More calligraphy appears on the narrow strips and translates as “good luck and prosperity.” As we’ve seen, such good wishes are prevalent on the everyday objects of Islamic culture. Likewise, the window includes an inscription in the upper central square: “Mohammad’s blessing” in rectangular Kufic characters.

Crossing Bridges
Islamic architectural interiors had very few furnishings, so textiles and windows such as these would have played an important role in decorating and illuminating living spaces. The concept of “clothing” the architectural space is a vital part of Islamic culture; perhaps it is also a universal inclination.

Do you feel such a need to beautify your own personal surroundings?

What measures have you taken to decorate your dorm, home, or office?
**Beauty and Belief**

The Word / A Rhythm of Repetition

**Calligraphic Piece**
Colors on black paper with gold flecks, Possibly transcribed by Zayn al-Abidin al-Isfahani in 1802, Iran, H. 25.7 cm W. 18.5 cm, Wellcome Library, London, Wellcome Islamic Calligraphy 80

**Silk Textile**
Probably for use in the interior of the Ka`bah, Silk-satin, lampas weave, Turkey (probably Bursa), circa 1800, H. 189.5 cm W. 67.3 cm, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., Purchase, S1996.62.1-2

*beauty of the object*

In both of these objects, key words are embedded in a visual feast of repeated patterns. The intricate calligraphic piece consists of Arabic sayings referring to the Prophet’s son-in-law and cousin, ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib. The compositional balance and symmetry of the work is achieved in its horizontal and vertical, alternately colored bands of calligraphy. The style has certainly inspired contemporary Islamic artists, and the abstract complexity reminds us of the American post-WWII movement of abstract expressionism.

The brocaded silk-satin textile, embellished with inscriptions in repeated zigzag bands in ivory silk thread on a red ground, may have been created to decorate the interior of the Ka`bah in Mecca. This type of zigzag-patterned textile, filled with inscriptions of Qur’anic verses and invocations, also served as a cover for the Prophet Muhammad’s tomb in Medina. By tradition, when the textiles used for sacred purposes are replaced, the fabrics are cut and distributed as cherished mementos that carry with them a blessing (*barakah*).

*an expression of belief*

These timeless, yet modern pieces use color, pattern, and composition to engage and captivate the viewer. The rhythmic, chant-like cadences allow the viewer to meditate on the meanings of the sacred words. And yet, the rich textures combine to suggest something even deeper within the composition that might be disclosed through contemplative consideration. Perhaps the repetition of the word patterns awakens within us a sense of the order in the universe. The words themselves are transformed into symbolic imagery that transcends language.

As poets throughout the ages can attest, the patterns of words are a type of universal music. The repeated rhythms of iambic pentameter, for example, become like an incantation or chant. When words are embedded into the patterns of visual language, the striking rhythms bring additional energy and dynamism to the two-dimensional art of calligraphy. The shapes and voids of the patterns are like the sounds and silences of music.

- Have you ever attempted to hear the music of the visual arts?
- Can you detect the rhythms of certain architectural structures or the melody of a landscape?
Beauty and Belief

No Beginning No End

Beauty of the Object

- Can you recognize what these three objects have in common?

Each has a central point around which everything else gravitates. The tenth-century bowl, for example, is embellished with bold Kufic calligraphy surrounding a single central dot. The calligraphy is so abstract that its meaning is now difficult to decipher. The designs of the painting and calligraphic scroll also radiate out from a central focal point.

The vibrant colors of VAV + HWE create a visual celebration that entices the viewer into its swirling center. The Farsi title, "Vav," means "by"; and the word "Hwe," or "He," usually refers to God.

- Can you find meaning in this cryptic reference?

Crossing Bridges

- Can you identify why the project director/curator of this exhibition chose to complete your journey showing these particular works?

You have seen only a small part of the richness of Islamic art and culture—part of the whole, like the fragments in the first gallery. And yet you have crossed bridges of understanding that may forever deepen your appreciation for this vast and complex culture and its people. As you reach the final image of the exhibition—the projection of a detail from the same scroll that you encountered at the entrance to the exhibition—you have come full circle. The central inscription of the eight-pointed star consists of one of the names of God, The Healer (al-shafi).

- How might this parting message be meaningful to you?
Dr. Sabiha Al Khemir was born in Tunisia, educated in Tunis and London, and currently lives in New York. She is a writer, artist, and expert in Islamic art whose work is concerned with cultural bridging and dialogue.

She was the Founding Director of the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar. Dr. Al Khemir and her most recent historical novel, *The Blue Manuscript*, were featured at the 2009 National Book Festival, Washington, D.C. Written in English and translated into five languages, it is a tour de force that traces the search for the fabled manuscript by an international team on an archaeological dig in Egypt. Dr. Al Khemir also writes in French and Arabic and lectures internationally in all three languages.

She has produced documentaries broadcast on Channel 4, UK, and directed other exhibitions including *From Cordoba to Samarkand*, Louvre, 2006.

As a well-known artist, her art has been featured internationally, including in the United States. Her illustrative works include *The Island of Animals* and a number of book covers of well-known titles such as *Respected Sir* by the Nobel Prize-winning author Naquib Mahfouz.

Known for her commitment to achieving understanding through the respect of cultures and appreciation of beauty, Dr. Al Khemir brings a unique vision to art in particular and humanity in general.