



Ink Silk & Gold

Islamic Art from the
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Ingram Gallery

October 9, 2015–January 10, 2016

Ink, Silk, and Gold: Islamic Art from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston explores the splendor and richness of Islamic art through nearly one hundred objects in an array of media: gilded and enameled glass, inlaid metal- and woodwork, knotted carpets, luster ceramics, manuscripts inscribed in gold, textiles woven with precious metal, and more. Spanning from the eighth to the twenty-first centuries, the works originated in an Islamic world ranging from Spain and Morocco in the West to India and Indonesia in the East, with recent works produced in the global art capitals of London and New York. Mostly functional objects, their meanings unfold as much through the materials out of which they were made as through the words and images they may bear. A ninth-century Qur'an written in gold calligraphy on indigo-stained parchment reflects the value placed on writing as a marker of religious and intellectual cultivation. A thirteenth-century eight-sided star tile ornamented with Persian poetry (fig. 1) alludes to Sufi mystical beliefs in divine love. A fourteenth-century glass mosque lamp (fig. 2) is a metaphor for the verse written in a tall cursive script on its neck, "God is the Light of the heavens and earth" (Qur'an 24:35). A nineteenth-

century melon made of steel—a metal endowed with a religious aura in Iran—is an emblem of abundance and Paradise.

Secular Islamic manuscript illumination presents idealized visions of this world in which even everyday objects are marked by beauty and refinement. An excellent case in point is a vividly colored sixteenth-century miniature painted in Bukhara, a cultural capital in Uzbekistan (cover). The scene depicts a courtly couple with musicians and attendants on a terrace adjacent to an enclosed springtime garden, a setting for love. The composition is centered on a languid young woman—the beloved—dressed in an elegant coat with an embroidered floral pattern. On a carpet, her suitor expresses his ardor by kneeling, offering her wine, and tugging on her coat. Musicians play a *daf* (tambourine) and an *oud* (a lute-like instrument), while wine is served from bejeweled metal decanters into blue-and-white porcelain cups and fruit is presented in a footed metal bowl. The figures are enveloped in an environment that ravishes all of their senses and, by extension, the viewer's own.

Focusing on the materiality of Islamic art is one way to begin exploring a cultural world in which spectacular objects are significant and powerful. After a brief introduction to Islam and the mediums of ink, silk, and gold, the exhibition proceeds chronologically and regionally. The objects take us on a journey from the earliest works of Islamic art, such as Qur'ans and vessels with blessings inscribed in Arabic, to recent works by four cosmopolitan Muslim artists who bring traditional Islamic techniques and imagery into conversation with the art of the contemporary world.

Trinita Kennedy, curator



This exhibition was organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Cover: Couple with attendants, Uzbekistan (Bukhara), mid-16th century. Ink, color, and gold on paper. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Francis Bartlett Donation of 1912 and Picture Fund, 14.584. **Figure 1:** Star tile with horse, Iran (probably Kashan), dated AH 710/AD 1310. Fritware with blue and luster decoration on opaque white glaze. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Maria Antoinette Evans Fund and funds donated by Edward Jackson Holmes, 31.729. **Figure 2:** Mosque lamp, Egypt (Cairo), early 1320s. Glass with gold and enamel decoration. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Edward Jackson Holmes, 37.614. All photographs © 2015 MFA, Boston



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