



“PEARLS OF WISDOM” ILLUMINATES ISLAMIC ART

The exhibition “Pearls of Wisdom: The Arts of Islam at the University of Michigan” (October 15 to December 21, 2014) showcases the rich collections of Islamic art at the University of Michigan. The selected objects highlight how patrons, artists, and other individuals have used the expressive arts in order to promote social order and spiritual harmony in both the secular and the religious spheres. They also reveal how the visual arts help envision and implement a harmonious order of living in various Islamic cultures from the seventh century until the present day.

The show is a result of numerous efforts and collaborations, beginning first with a graduate seminar offered by Christiane Gruber, Associate Professor of Islamic Art in the History of Art Department. During fall 2013, Professor Gruber and a dozen students worked through the holdings of Islamic art in the Kelsey Museum. The course combined primary and secondary source readings with hands-on work with objects, including ceramics, tiles, textiles, jewelry, amulets, coins, illustrated manuscripts, paintings, woodwork, glasswares, and metalwares (fig. 1). During and after the course, Ashley Dimmig, a Ph.D. student in Islamic art, joined forces with Professor Gruber to conceptualize, organize, and implement the show as co-curator.

Although permanent museum displays of Islamic art are often arranged chronologically and geographically, this exhibition is organized by themes integral to the conception and production of art in the Islamic world from the medieval period until the present day. Themes include the intersections between function and decoration; the aesthetic power of everyday objects; visual play, wit, and magic; connections across art forms; and light

symbolism and illumination. The objects also raise a number of questions about art and its intersections with allegorical and analogical expression.

The title of the show is inspired by a metaphorical statement penned by the medieval Arabic calligrapher Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi (died after 1009–1010), who in his treatise on penmanship calls handwriting the necklace of wisdom, which serves to sort the *pearls of wisdom*. To no small extent, the objects included in the exhibition “Pearls of Wisdom” serve to concretize, elucidate, and expand upon his assertions. In addition, the exhibit explores a number of intertwining “strands”—from everyday beauty, play, and protection to media and light metaphors—all the while bringing together Islamic art objects “dispersed” across campus institutions, including the Kelsey Museum, the Special Collections of the Hatcher Graduate Library, the U-M Museum of Art, the U-M Museum of Anthropological Archaeology, and the Photographic Archives at the Visual Resources Collections in the History of Art Department.

To Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, both the calligrapher’s art of beautiful writing and a jeweler’s stringing of pearls order the universe in a wise and harmonious fashion. A calligrapher’s training begins with learning the proper proportions of beautiful writing. In the Arabic script, this proportional system of writing is based on the rhomboid—the shape the ink-soaked tip of the reed pen makes when impressed on a writing surface. Each letter of the alphabet is then formed proportionately by measuring its height and width with strands of rhomboids or circular “pearls” (fig. 2). These calligraphic measuring marks indeed appear as if strings of

pearls, thus revealing a continuously dynamic and creative engagement across art forms within Islamic traditions.

While calligraphy takes pride of place in Islamic artistic traditions, the art of beautiful writing is not the only art form that fulfills both utilitarian and aesthetic functions. Many objects produced in various media illustrate the harmony between utility and beauty in the arts of the Islamic world, and thus the exhibition’s first section takes up “Everyday Beauty.” Another way to look at the intersections of function and beauty is through objects that are used to beautify oneself. The old adage that cleanliness is next to godliness has an equivalent in the Islamic context, in which personal hygiene is praised as “half of faith.” The ritual cleansing of one’s body for prayer is of utmost importance to the daily practice of Islam. Thus, objects for cleansing the body are integral to Islamic life.

Beyond their aesthetic appeal, objects in the Islamic world also include images and patterns that dare viewers to decipher or solve a variety of visual challenges. While some of these art forms are lighthearted and playful, others cater to the more serious business of imparting wisdom and tending to ailments. For example, some drinking vessels known as



1. Exhibition curators Ashley Dimmig (left) and Christiane Gruber (second from right) examine an Islamic metal bowl at the Kelsey.  
2. Examples of the letter kaf with pearl-shaped measures in red ink, Tacheyzade Mehmet bin Tacettin, Calligraphy Treatise (Risale-yi hat), penned by Kebeyzade Mehmet Vasfi Efendi ca. 1772, Special Collections, Hatcher Graduate Library, Isl. Ms. 401.

3. Magic bowl with attached prayer tablets, probably 19th or 20th century. Historic Scientific Instrument Collection, Special Collections, Hatcher Graduate Library, GL7.  
4. Textile fragment with rabbits, 11th century, KM 22645; and water filter with rabbit design, 10th–12th centuries, KM 1969.2.120.

5. The Prophet Muhammad’s death, Fuzuli, Hadiqat al-Su’ada (Garden of the Blessed), text dated AH 1006/1598 CE, Special Collections, Hatcher Graduate Library, Isl. Ms. 386, page 137.  
6. Cover of the “Pearls of Wisdom” catalogue.

magic or medicinal bowls were used for concocting potions to cure a variety of ills, from infertility to scorpion bites (fig. 3). Other apotropaic objects such as pendants bearing inscriptions, magic squares, and seal designs functioned as wearable amulets.

Whether for the sake of humor or healing, many objects highlight the perceived agency and power of objects in the Islamic world, and so form part of the exhibition’s second section, entitled “Play and Protection.” They also pay tribute to the wit and wisdom required of their makers, inviting their owners and viewers to stimulate their dormant powers through the interrelated practices of visual engagement and tactile interaction.

The exhibition’s third section explores the concept of “Media Metaphors.” In his treatise, al-Tawhidi draws a parallel between calligraphy and jewelry by using one art form as a metaphor for the other. This phenomenon, in which one medium mimics or refers to the qualities of another, is relatively common in Islamic art. Such is the case with ceramic bowls painted with luster that shimmers like gold, ceramic vessels encrusted with jewel-shaped bezels, and floral mosaics that recall the lush gardens of paradise.

At other times a particular medium could be so valued that other media were manipulated to emulate it, or sometimes a particular pattern was merely popularized within a particular medium and then spread to others, as can be seen in the recurring motif of lively rabbits galloping across a textile or a water filter (fig. 4). Yet again, some motifs and patterns transcend a particular material and appear in various objects, from glassworks to metalwares. Through the potential of metaphor, artists and craftsmen often experimented with new techniques, perfecting their craft while concurrently pushing the limits of their own media.

While al-Tawhidi likens beautiful handwriting to wisdom and order, another way to visually represent spiritual and intellectual enlightenment is through illumination—the embellishment of manuscripts with geometric and vegetal

designs. Many Islamic manuscripts were illuminated with metallic and polychrome paints, including copies of the Qur’an and paintings of Muhammad and his family bearing gold aureoles (fig. 5). In Islamic thought, light represents God’s presence, and thus illumination is not mere ornament. Much more significantly, it serves to illuminate God’s sacred word and the radiant nature of his Prophet. Since it reflects light and emits a radiant glow, gold pigment plays a central role in illumination. Indeed, illuminating a codex not only increases its intrinsic material value; it also adds glory, confers dignity, amplifies the imaginative force, and clarifies technical details.

For both practical and spiritual reasons, there are many objects that literally emit light, chief among them lamps. While all lamps serve the same function, they come in a variety of forms and media, from blown enamel-painted hanging mosque lamps to smaller ceramic ones meant for domestic use and decorated with hand-executed or molded decorative patterns. Some oil lamps are also covered in monochrome glazes, some of which appear iridescent. Each type of lamp—whether of glass or ceramic—emitted light but also played with it. As it illuminated a space, light ricocheted off the lamp’s own glazed or reflective surfaces, once again placing function and beauty in aesthetic concert.

While exploring these many themes and the role of analogical thought put to artistic practice, the exhibition “Pearls of Wisdom” also aims to pay tribute to the strength of the collections of Islamic art at the University of Michigan. Thus, the curators decided that the show’s key image and the print catalogue’s cover (fig. 6) would be a textile whose hues recall the University’s own maize and blue colors. This color palette has been extended to the show’s permanent online catalogue (<http://lw.lsa.umich.edu/kelsey/pearls/index.html>), which includes all exhibition objects as well as further resources, photographs, and a program of all events and lectures that will take place in conjunction with the show during Fall 2014.

Christiane Gruber

