Outstanding Examples of Secular Islamic Art

Gallery 2
QUESTIONS?
Contact us at acklandlearn@unc.edu

ACKLAND ART MUSEUM
The University of North Carolina
at Chapel Hill
101 S. Columbia Street
Chapel Hill, NC 27514
Phone: 919-966-5736

MUSEUM HOURS
Wed - Sat 10 a.m. – 5 p.m.
Sun 1 – 5 p.m.
Closed Mondays & Tuesdays.
Closed July 4th, Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve,
Christmas Day, & New Year’s Day.
About About the Art

The Ackland’s *About the Art* guides offer information about every work of art from the Museum’s collection that is on view in galleries 2, 3, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, and 17. All of these galleries are marked on the Gallery Map available at the desk in the Lobby. In the bottom right corner of the label beside each object, there is an open book symbol with a number. You can find the same symbol and number on the top of the corresponding page in *About the Art*.

Within each entry, you can find the following information:

- At the top of the page, you’ll see a thumbnail image, the title of the object, who made it and with what materials, and where and when it was made.

- Next, you’ll see bullet points with information or observations about the object (more or fewer, depending on how much we know about the object so far). There is no standard formula for what kinds of information appears, but you will often find comments on historical context, style, and materials.

- In keeping with the Ackland’s tagline, “Look Close, Think Far,” the first bullet point will often highlight something visible in the work of art itself.

- You will find names, phrases, and concepts that could be good internet search terms for those who want to learn more.

- When specialized terms are used, you’ll see a definition, helpful contextual information, or language suitable for an internet search.

- Whenever we know the artist’s name, there will be some details about the artist’s life, often under the heading “About the Artist,” but sometimes as one of the bullet points.

For those visitors who want to engage further with an object, we also suggest other resources to investigate on our website: [ackland.org/education/learning-resources](http://ackland.org/education/learning-resources).

The authors of *About the Art* include Ackland curators and educators who use a variety of sources. They consult museum records, art historical research, comments from outside specialists, and more.

**About Gallery 2b: Outstanding Examples of Secular Islamic Art**

These two galleries display selections of the Museum’s growing collection of art from Islamic traditions. Artworks in stone, ceramic, metal, glass paper and textile range in date from the tenth century to about 1900. In various ways the works in Gallery 2a relate closely to the beliefs and practices of Islam from a number of countries. Examples of secular stone carving and ceramics are in Gallery 2b. Notice that there are people and animals in these non-religious artworks.
About the Art

- The making of this earthenware bowl tells the story of early lusterware from the Fatimid Kingdom of Egypt and Syria during the tenth to the twelfth centuries. Lusterware was first invented in Iraq during the earlier Abbasid period of the ninth century. It was kept as a secret technology and passed to the Fatimids, perhaps when Abbasid potters traveled to the next viable court.

- This vessel is from a site excavated in Syria.

- After being shaped, the bowl was covered in a tin-opacified lead glaze to make it white in color when fired.

- In a second stage, gold suspended in a medium was painted over the white and fired a second time in an oxygen-reducing kiln. This caused the gold to chemically bond with the first glaze.

- A luster bird decorates this deep bowl. It is pictured in profile, looking lively, as we can tell through its alert eye and partially outstretched wings.

- At the Fatimid court high-level ministers and accomplished men were presented precious garments with armbands, called tiraz, sewn in. They typically were made up of sayings conveying good wishes for health, long life, wealth, etc. This lucky bird not only appears to have armbands on his wings, but also on his tail and neck. The writing in these bands is pseudo-Arabic, so it cannot be read.

- Scrolling palmettes and split palmette surround the bird, illustrating the principle of horror vacui, Latin for “fear of empty space” that one finds so often in Islamic art.

- After the Fatimid period, the technique for making lusterware traveled to the Seljuk court in Persia, remaining secret. There are two examples of Persian luster on the opposite side of this gallery. One depicts human figures — musicians playing — in a manner much more detailed than this bird, and on a more finely-potted bowl, which shows the further development of later lusterware.
About the Art

- This teardrop-shaped, cut-steel object made of two panels riveted together with steel bars was once half of the main decorative element of an alam, an ornamental standard. It was carried on the battlefield and in processions of mourners on Ashura, the Shi’i holiday commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussain in the battle of Karbala, on the tenth day of Muharram, the first month of the Muslim calendar. The alam was believed to have protective talismanic power.

- Complete, this tour-de-force example of skill in metalwork would have included another pair of similar drop-shaped panels so that each panel pointed towards one of the four compass points.

- The finely cut calligraphy around the outline says, down the right side, “Indeed, we sent the Qur’an down during the Night of Decree” (Surah al-Qadr (97), verse 2) and up the left side, in reverse, “The Night of Decree is better than a thousand months” (Surah al-Qadr (7), verse 3).
About the Art

- Mughal Indian windows in all types of buildings were filled with carved stone jalis, perforated screens that allowed for ventilation and control of the light, heat, and glare of the sun. Most importantly, due to the depth and complexity of the pattern carved into the stone, they could be seen through only from the inside, ensuring privacy from the world outside.

- Jalis differ greatly in format — some vertical, others horizontal, and others square. Some of their designs are floral, and some are geometric and curvilinear, as in this case.

- The design here is especially complex, featuring rectangles rotating around a central square with two circles organizing the pattern. The square format of this jali reinforces the power of its geometry.
Unidentified artist  
Iranian, Seljuk period  
**Bowl**, early 13th century  
stonepaste, with luster decoration over opaque white glaze  
Gift of the SK Heninger, Jr. Fund for Islamic Art, 2021.43.1

**About the Art**

- Two Persian musicians, one on the right playing a harp, one on the left playing a tambourine, face each other in the interior of this gold-colored luster bowl. We can tell they are outside by the “checkboard” cypress tree between them, and a decorated, fringed parasol partially visible over their heads.

- These individuals of indeterminate gender are wearing robes of elaborate textiles with a design consisting mainly of roundels, or circles, filled with a double palmette leaf. This pattern is also present on the lower side of the bowl, underneath the cypress tree, and on the parasol.

- The secret recipe for making luxurious lusterware had been passed to Kashan potters from Egypt just a decade or two before this pot was created. It illustrates all the traits of good lusterware: a finely potted body covered with tin-opacified lead glaze to create a white surface on which the potter paints with a metallic glaze that is fixed to the white surface in a second firing.

- The all-over design of the piece, including rows of scripts circling the interior rim is an example of *horror vacui*, a Latin term meaning “fear of empty space.” Horror vacui is a hallmark of Islamic art. The scripts around the bowl’s interior rim include stylized *kufic* and cursive scripts.

- The bulbous profile of this bowl is somewhat unusual and a less dense design — seemingly dashed off compared to the finish of the interior — follows the contour. Closer to the high, unglazed foot, are a pair of continuous lines that look modern despite their age.
Unidentified artist
Iranian, Seljuk period
**Jug**, 13th century
Kashan ware: stonepaste, with cobalt, turquoise and luster decoration over white glaze
Gift of the SK Heninger, Jr. Fund for Islamic Art, 2021.46

**About the Art**

- This diminutive Persian lusterware ceramic jug dates from 1350 (?) and mimics a metalwork form.

- Though small, it packs a punch! Cobalt blue and turquoise glazes have been added to the characteristic golden-shaded luster of this period. Vertical, rounded ribs down the sides of the vessel are accented in one of the alternating colors. Pseudo-Arabic script further articulates the luster-painted ribs.

- The spout has a distinctive geometric shape that complements the round shape of the body.

- Comparing this little jug with the slightly earlier Persian lusterware bowl beside it, one can see how luster technology in Persia advanced through adding additional colors. However, the decoration of the jug is not as finely rendered as the bowl's carefully drawn musicians in their fine robes surrounded by “checkerboard” cypress trees.
Unidentified artist
Turkish, Ottoman period
Dish, c. 1570
Iznik ware: stonepaste, with polychrome underglaze painting
Gift of the William E. Shipp Estate, by exchange, 2019.49

About the Art

- The free-flowing and lively design of various flowers, including tulips, carnations, hyacinths and others emerging from a single tuft is characteristic of Iznik wares of this period. Amusingly, one carnation pierces a tulip flower.

- Iznik ware, named after the town of Iznik in Anatolia in present day Turkey where it was thought to have been made, is a decorated ceramic that was produced from the last quarter of the fifteenth century until the end of the seventeenth century.

- The rim, with its stylized blue “wave-and-rock” design, is evidence of the exchange with Chinese ceramics and motifs.