

# ABOUT THE ART

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Outstanding Examples  
of Secular Islamic Art

Gallery 2

ACKLAND

## **QUESTIONS?**

Contact us at [acklandlearn@unc.edu](mailto: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.

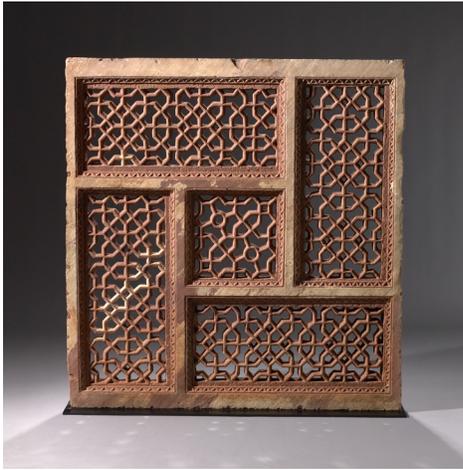


Unidentified artist  
Spanish or North African  
**Funerary Stele with Islamic Epigraphy**, c. 1209  
marble  
William A. Whitaker Art Foundation Art Fund, 2023.22

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## About the Art

- This funerary *stèle*, a stone slab created to memorialize the deceased, highlights the importance of calligraphy in Islamic art. Inscriptions fill the horizontal bands on the top and bottom of the stele, the central cartouche, and the vertical bands that frame the inset panel. Dense vegetal and geometric patterning accompanies the calligraphy, illustrating the Latin term *horror vacui*, an important element of Islamic decoration that means “fear of empty space.”
- Certain architectural elements of this tombstone distinguish it from others created in al-Andalus (Islamic Spain) and the Maghreb (Western North Africa) and make it difficult to assign a place of origin to this work. The vertical panel topped with a horseshoe arch is bordered by vertical bands of calligraphy that recall the arch and support columns of a *mihrab*, or a prayer niche in a mosque. Horseshoe arches can be seen on stelae from both al-Andalus and North Africa, but the sculptural effect created by the spatial recession of the central panel of the Ackland’s stele sets it apart.
- The script includes a Qur’anic quotation and the epitaph of a man who died on Monday, December 15, 1209 AD (although this date was in fact a Tuesday). Eulogies are included with the deceased’s name, parentage, and the location of his death.
- The Qur’an dictates that the dead be buried within a day in an unmarked grave. Still, stelae such as this were used by some Muslims, illustrating that not all rules were always adhered to.



Unidentified artist  
Mughal, Jahangir period  
**Perforated Screen**, c. 1605–27  
sandstone  
Special Acquisition Fund, 2019.16.3

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### About the Art

- Mughal Indian windows in all types of buildings were filled with *jalis*, carved stone 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 curvilinear, and some are geometric, 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, Hamadan  
**Balustrade with Arabesque and  
Animal Decorations**, c. 1100–1350  
sandstone  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Osborne Hauge,  
98.11ab

## About the Art

- Inscriptions on a similar balustrade section in the Metropolitan Museum in New York provide a likely date of 1303–1304 for the execution of this work as well as for nearly identical ones in the Cleveland Museum of Art and the Louvre.
- Finely carved sculpture like this is similar to that of the richly ornamented architectural projects of the Ilkhanid sultans in medieval Persia, the descendants of Genghis Khan's grandson Hülegü.
- The theme of the hunt, exemplified in the scene of a lion attacking a bull on one side of the balustrade, is one that has a long history in Persian art. This type of imagery remained popular in aristocratic circles throughout the early Islamic period (which began in the seventh century) and was often associated with themes of power and kingship.
- The reverse side features an elaborate geometrical and arabesque pattern with one animal.





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

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### 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 design called “wave-and-rock,” is evidence of the Ottoman artist’s awareness of Chinese ceramics and motifs through international trade.



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. It has a finely potted body covered with lead glaze with tin added to make it opaque. This creates 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

Central Asia, Uzbekistani

**Splashware Bowl with Sgraffito Decoration,**  
c. 960-1080

glazed earthenware with incised decoration  
and coloured glazes of yellow, green and  
manganese on a cream slip ground

Gift of the Estate of William S. Shipp, by  
exchange, 2020.12

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### About the Art

- This dramatic, large conical bowl features yellow and green roundels criss-crossed with rectangular cartouches, or frames, in manganese brown on a creamy ground. The roundels and the spaces in between them are incised vigorously with a design of spiral motifs.
- With its vibrant decoration of glazes bleeding into each other, this Uzbekistani bowl resembles the style and appearance of medieval Persian ceramics known as Nishapur splashware, a type of pottery that appears to have been produced exclusively in the Nishapur region during the tenth century.