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A Letter from the Islamic Department

Dear Patrons, Friends and Supporters of the Islamic Art Department,

We hope that all of you are doing well in these uncertain times. While The Metropolitan Museum of Art is temporarily closed, the Department of Islamic Art is still hard at work writing, researching, and caring for the extraordinary works of art in our collection remotely.

We want to remain in close touch with you during the Museum shutdown, and will therefore be issuing our newsletter more frequently. We hope our collections will be of special interest and meaning during the days ahead.

We miss being with the art, of course, and with that in mind, we wanted to share with you some of our personal favorite pieces. These objects have filled us with delight and uplift our spirits at this challenging time. Later, when the days are warm, and The Met is open again, we welcome you back to our galleries to see the works in person.

With best wishes,

The Department of Islamic Art

Here Are a Few of Our Favorite Objects:

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Panel from a Rectangular Box. Spain, probably Cordoba. 10th-early 11th century. Ivory; carved, inlaid with stone with traces of pigment. John Stewart Kennedy Fund, 1913. [13.141.](#)

If you meditate on this delicate carved panel it slowly reveals itself. From within the dense foliage five distinct vertical trees begin to emerge: three with pointed leaves around which pairs of figures dance, two others with pine cones, flanked by birds and jackals. The figures are somewhat mysterious- is one of the central dancers wearing a veil while all others are in small turbans? If so, is she the only female? Scholars don't all agree on the identification of the figures.

Jackals, peacocks, falcons and a lone hare (can you spot it, and is it a hare?) can be found among the leaves. Traces of green and red can be seen too, along with drill holes in the eyes and elsewhere that would have held sparkling quartz. Following the lines of the beaded cartouches - they logically overlap into the upper border too. Thanks to the hires picture we have online (click link to see), I have spent many moments in happy observation taking in the exquisite detail of this treasure from Islamic Spain.

- Navina Haidar, Nasser Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah Curator in Charge



Ring Shaped Ewer. Iran. 8th century. Earthenware; molded and glazed. Gift of Richard Ettinghausen, 1978. [1978.549.2.](#)

The mysterious shape and function of this ring-shaped ewer have always intrigued me. The patina of the glazed surface creates beautiful color and accentuates the patterns. I enjoy thinking about how I would use this ewer. Would I use it every day to drink water? Or for a momentous occasion, offering water in a spiritual exchange? Anyway, I always stop in the galleries to give it a second look.

- Shane Morrissey, Departmental Technician



***Animal Flask.* Probably Syria. Late 7th-8th century. Glass; amber-colored; blown, applied decoration. Gift of Mrs. Charles S. Payson, 1969. [69.153](#).**

I love this little glass animal flask from Syria. The beautiful iridescence on the surface is a natural result caused by weathering that was not intentional when it was first created. This effect was adopted centuries later by artists like [Louis Comfort Tiffany](#) (American, 1848-1933). The craftsman has created a rather unusual form of a camel, which has two heads! On its back, it carries a vessel, much like a real creature bearing cargo as part of a caravan traveling long distances. At 5" high, whoever owned this little object likely used the small container to hold perfume or kohl (eye makeup).

- Courtney Stewart, Senior Research Assistant

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Pierced Jug with Harpies and Sphinxes. Iran, Kashan. Dated A.H. 612/1215-16. Stonepaste; openwork, underglaze-painted, glazed in transparent turquoise. Fletcher Fund, 1932. [32.52.1](#).

With a carved and pierced outer shell that surrounds a solid inner container, this intricate feat of pottery emulates a metal object. The openwork - featuring Harpies (mythical bird women), Sphinxes, quadrupeds (four-footed mammals), and scrolls - was first painted with touches of black and cobalt blue. The entire jug was then covered in a transparent turquoise glaze. Persian verses (composed by the poet Rukn al-Din Qummi) are inscribed around the rim, and an anonymous love poem near the base includes the date of production.

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at them, it is as if they smile back at me. Their playfulness and serene expression are amusing and convey hope and reassurance. In medieval times such creatures aimed to protect the people and the world from sickness and disasters, exactly what we all need right now.

- Denis Beyazit, Associate Curator



Fragment of a Carved and Painted Dado Panel. Iran, Nishapur. 10th-11th century. Stone (probably alabaster); carved and painted. Rogers Fund, 1940. [40.170.671](#).

I first encountered this fragment of carved alabaster from Nishapur when I was researching pre-Mongol stonework traditions, three years before I joined The Met. By looking at its surface closely, it is apparent that the mason who carved it employed only a flat chisel, using a technique that substantially differs from stone-working in the central Islamic lands and in medieval and Islamic Europe, where a variety of toothed tools (chisels, hammers, etc.) were also used.

I investigated the inscription, which is in a type of foliated kufic script found both east and west of Nishapur, on [my second visit at The Met](#) (video at 1:12:43). The few letters left may be read as "[al-s](a)mawat wa[l-ard]", as in the Qur'anic aya (24:35) describing God as the Light of the Heavens and the Earth. This verse is recurrent in inscriptions on the 11th and 12th-century architecture. Traces of pigment in the epigraphic band suggest that its letters would have stood against a blue background, creating a striking effect in the room at Vineyard Tepe where the alabaster panel was originally set.

Our research continues, at times directly with the object itself along with The Met's conservators and scientists, and at other times at our desks. Is the blue pigment a

finds imply? Were the inhabitants of this room eccentrics, or affluent? Or were they just personally connected with the nearby quarries of Bayhaq? What do the tools employed in the Nishapur stone-carving tell us in terms of the circulation of artisans, technologies, and motifs?

- Martina Rugiadi, Associate Curator



The Feast of Sada, Folio 22v from the *Shahnama* (Book of Kings) of Shah Tahmasp. Abu'l Qasim Firdausi (935-1020). Painting attributed to Sultan Muhammad (active first half 16th century). Iran, Tabriz. ca. 1525. Opaque watercolor, ink, silver, and gold on paper. Gift of Arthur A. Houghton Jr., 1970. [1970.301.2](https://nma.ashmolean.org/objects/1970.301.2).

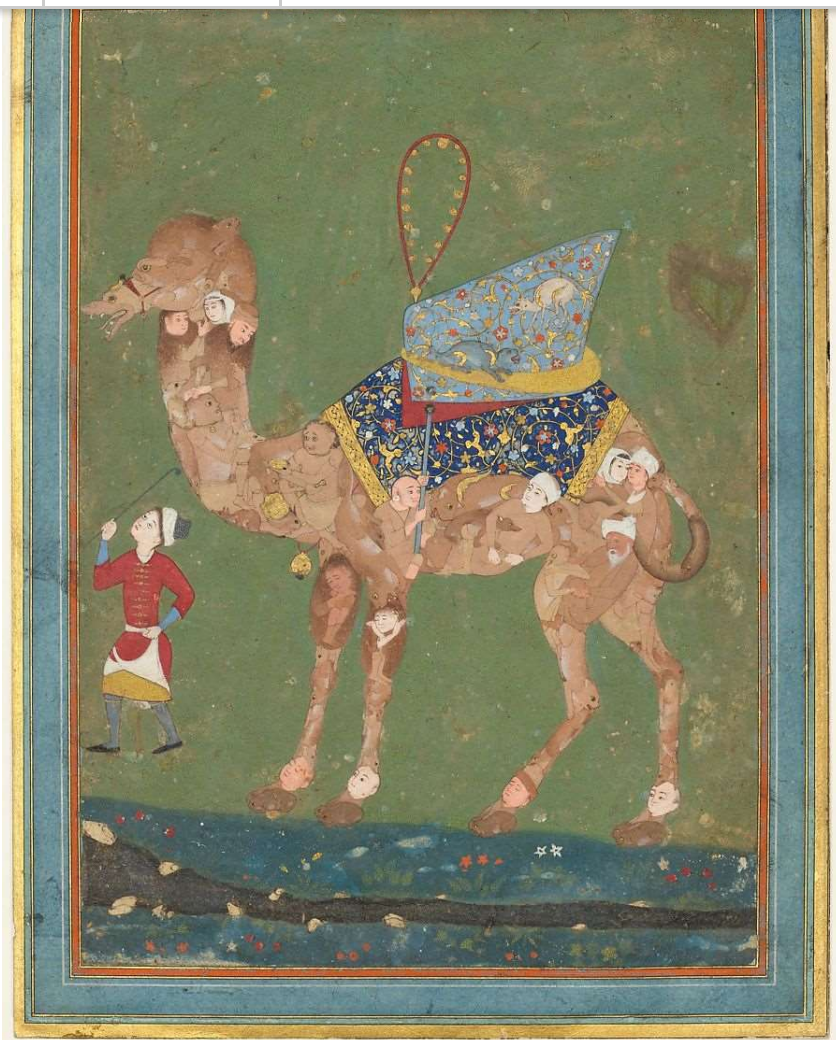
This folio depicting the "Feast of Sada" attributed to the 16th-century painter, Sultan Muhammad, was produced in Tabriz, Iran in around 1525. It once belonged to the celebrated royal manuscript of the Persian national epic the *Shahnama* (Book of Kings) made for Shah Tahmasp, the second ruler of the Safavid dynasty (r. 1524-1576) of which

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The painting is intriguing. At first glance, it appears to be a rendition of a traditional Persian royal feast (*bazm*) in which the legendary king Hushang is seated holding a cup of wine at the center of a paradisiacal landscape surrounded by guests and attendants. But, upon closer inspection and reading of the poetry, we become aware of the real significance of this image. It is a celebration of the discovery of fire, which, according to the verses, occurred by sheer coincidence! One day, Hushang spotted a ferocious beast lurking behind the rocks (top right-hand corner of the margins). He hurled a stone at it, which missed the monster but hit a rock instead, causing sparks to fly. To celebrate this magical moment, he made a fire and held a feast. This is how Hushang introduced fire worship to mankind and the Zoroastrian people who practice it to this day.

This painting represents Sultan Muhammad's hand at its best: the vibrant hues of pink, purple, and violet to depict the fantastical landscape, especially the mysterious rocks with tiny hidden faces and grotesques, the sympathetic portrayal of animals (birds, gazelle, donkeys, goats, and cows) and blooming flowers and trees and lastly, the playful convention of allowing parts of the composition to break out of the frame of the image into its gold-speckled borders.

- Maryam Ekhtiar, Curator



***Composite Camel with Attendant.* Iran, Khurasan. Third quarter 16th century. Opaque watercolor and ink on paper. Gift of George D. Pratt, 1925. [25.83.6](#).**

When I was a child, I wanted to be a cryptozoologist. I was going to explore the furthest reaches of the world and discover strange and exciting new animals that had never been seen before. While things didn't work out quite as planned, I was fortunate enough to end up in the Department of Islamic Art at The Met, where I discovered a treasure trove of composite creatures. The Loch Ness monster pales in comparison to this fantastic camel, made up of everything from demons to monks to rabbits. He is fearsome from a distance, charming up close, and all over magical to see on a stroll through the galleries.

- Helen Goldenberg, Assistant Administrator

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The chevron-patterned water, the spotted one-eyed fish, and the charmingly composed flowers and leaves in this Persian garden carpet, so evocative of the tamed natural world, have always appealed to me and inspired curiosity about the emergence of this enchanting style of carpet. The recreation of a Persian garden within a carpet, flattened and stylized, yet so full of life and movement, is suggestive of the great value Persians placed on surrounding themselves with the natural world, albeit, in this case, a cultivated version.

Bringing the garden inside ones living space through a carpet suggests that the carpet owner enjoyed reflecting on the movement of water channels filled with fish and the beauty of flowering trees, perhaps seeking a perfect peace within nature, even during winter months when an outdoor garden is quiet and asleep.

- Annick Des Roches, Collections Manager



***Imam 'Ali and Sons with a Lion.* Isma'il Jalayir (Iranian, active ca. 1858-81). Iran. 1860s. Ink on cardboard. Purchase, 2017 NoRuz at The Met Benefit, 2018. [2018.500.](#)**

Unlike the staid, formal oil portraits of monarchs and members of the princely class of Qajar royalty, this extraordinary ink drawing of 'Ali with his sons, Hasan and Husayn,

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ability to convey that sense.

Classic in its extreme attention to details - from the gentle folds of the sitters' and attendants' robes to the soft aura surrounding the Imam to the precise hair placement in the lions' mane - this rendering reflects the artist's training at the Dar al-Funun college.

Jalayir was a favorite artist of the Qajar court and its ruler, Nasir al-Din Shah. In this drawing, the sensitively rendered image of a lion - the recognized symbol of 'Ali's strength and courage - emphasizes the artists' deep religious convictions.

- Jean Tibbetts, Associate for Administration

Contact Us:

We'd love to hear from you! If you have any questions about the Department of Islamic Art of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, please do reach out to helen.goldenberg@metmuseum.org.

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