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The Newsletter of the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah is intended to share the wealth and beauty of Islamic heritage contained within the al-Sabah Collection—a comprehensive, extensive, and detailed collection of Islamic art, ranging from early Islam to the 18th century, and the variety of scholarly and artistic activities associated with the collection.

The collection is organized according to both historical period and geographical region, and the references library and the publications of the DAR are closely related to the collection.

The DAR has sponsored, in cooperation with the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Science (KFAS), archaeological excavations in Baharna, Upper Egypt that date to the Fatimid period. Before the invasion, the art school associated with the DAR promoted skills in the various artistic genres that are represented in the collection. At present, our yearly lecture series has been revived and is a focal point for historians and other specialists, featuring talks by prominent international scholars on various topics in Islamic history, architecture, archaeology, and art.

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Islamic Art and Patronage: Schatzhaus Kuwait

The theme of "Patronage" took on special meaning in Frankfurt at the opening of Islamic Art and Patronage: Treasures from Kuwait at the Museum für Kunsthandwerk.

For the first time in its long tour, Islamic Art and Patronage: Treasures from Kuwait was fostered by a single patron, a precedent set by the Hauckbank of Frankfurt. Hauckbank chose to celebrate its bicentennial by hosting this exhibition. By doing so, the bank has extended this theme of patronage by becoming a modern patron of Islamic art, in the tradition of an earlier German patron of Islamic art, the Emperor Frederick II.

The theme of Islamic Art and Patronage: Treasures from Kuwait, derives from the link between art and patronage. Building a collection is an art form in itself since a patron's interest and knowledge is reflected in the worth and importance of the pieces collected. The Muslim patrons who throughout the ages have encouraged the production of the kind of objects found in Islamic Art and Patronage: Treasures from Kuwait have been the unsung heroes of an enlightened age. The collection of Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah contains some of the rarest and most important examples in the world.

A special preview took place for the bank and its clients on 20 May, 1996. This special event took place in the presence of Ms. Linda Reisch, Kulturdezernentin of the City of Frankfurt am Main, Sheikha Hussah al-Sabah, the Director of Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah; Mr. Axel Schütz and Prof. Dr. Kramer, Mr. Michael Hauck, Mr. Peter Gatti, Mr. Klaus Niendorf, of Hauckbank; H.E. Ambassador Abdulaziz al-Sharekh, Ambassador of the State of Kuwait to the Federal Republic of Germany; Dr. Arnulf Herbst, the Director of the Museum für Kunsthandwerk; Dr. Stefan Graf von der Schulenburg, Head of the Department of Eastern Art; Dr. Martina Mueller-Wiener, and guests. The speakers were pleasantly upstaged by alternate bursts of rain and sunshine visible from the huge window behind the podium.

The official opening under its German title, Islamic Art and Patronage: Schatzhaus Kuwait, was on Tuesday evening 21 May, 1996, under the auspices of the museum and bank officials, the Kuwaiti ambassador and his wife, Sheikha Hussah and the guest of honour, Prof. Dr. Anne-Marie Schimmel, who offered the opening remarks. Attendance was large, with over 350 guests attending, including many prominent scholars, art experts and journalists, and special friends of the DAR. After the opening addresses and viewing...
of the exhibition, the guests sampled Kuwaiti sweets and savories around a traditional Kuwaiti Bedouin tent which was set up in the museum garden.

The municipal Museum of Decorative Arts (Museum für Kunsthandwerk) of the city of Frankfurt contains over 30,000 objects from all areas of the applied arts. One of the aims of the museum is to demonstrate the relationships and influences between Western and Eastern cultures. Its Near Eastern Department presents Islamic art and crafts from the ninth to the 19th century.

The exhibition ran from May to October and was accompanied by a special series of monthly lectures on the topic of Islamic interaction with Western civilizations, organized by Hauckbanker of Frankfurt. One of the lecturers featured was renowned scholar, Prof. Dr. Annexmarie Schimmel. Prof. Schimmel recently visited Kuwait, where she gave several lectures, including a special addition to the Dar al-Atsar al-Islamiyyah lecture series on the subject of Islamic calligraphy (included in this issue).

Islamic Art and Patronage: Treasures from Kuwait has evolved throughout its six year run. Originally planned to reciprocate an exhibition by the State Hermitage Museum in Russia, on display in Kuwait in April 1990, it was to be followed by a tour of the U.S.A. arranged by the Trust for Museum Exhibitions in Washington. Islamic Art and Patronage left Kuwait only a week prior to the Iraqi invasion. It opened, as planned, in St. Petersburg (then Leningrad) on 6 August, and then moved to North America, starting in Baltimore, Maryland at the Walters Gallery in December 1990. A succession of shows followed. The collection appeared in Fort Worth, Texas at the Campbell Museum for Art; then at the Emory Museum of Art in Atlanta, Georgia; followed by the Scottsdale Cultural Centre in Scottsdale, Arizona; next appearing at the Virginia Museum for Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia; and then at the St. Louis Museum, St. Louis, Missouri. The collection then went north to The Canadian Museum of Civilization in Hull, Quebec, and then returned to the U.S.A. to appear at the New Orleans Museum of Art in Louisiana.

The tour has been extended indefinitely due to the Iraqi aggression on Kuwait, during which an intentional fire destroyed the building that once housed the collection. A new museum is presently being prepared at an historic site.

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Top: A moment to relax at the garden party. (left to right) H.E. Ambassador al-Sherkkh, H.E. Ambassador Günther Mülack, Dr. Stefan Graf von der Schulenberg and Prof. Dr. Bondarevsky.

Bottom: Ambassador Abdullah Bushara enjoying the Kuwaiti sweets, with Mrs. Hussah al-Muthkur, wife of the Kuwaiti Ambassador.

Special Thanks to Kuwait Airways and Kuwait Hotel Union for providing the catering of Kuwait traditional foods and the woolen tent.
in Kuwait, the former American Missionary Hospital, target-
ed to open in the year 2000.

After a successful run in North America, Islamic Art and
Patronage: Treasures from Kuwait began an European tour
This was followed, in the same year, by a showing in the
Netherlands at the Gemeentemuseum in the Hague, from
June until October. The exhibition then travelled to the his-
toric Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, and was on display there
from March until May of 1994.

The exhibition then visited the U.K. and opened at the
Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge University on 10 April,
1995. A new feature introduced at the Cambridge showing
was a conference on Kuwait’s history which took place on
May 19th in the Peterhouse Theatre. This conference was the
first to cover the history of Kuwait in the period before the
oil boom. It brought together speakers who have been at the
forefront of research into what is certainly not the best
known period in the history of the Gulf region. Its purpose
was to provide a platform for a stimulating exchange of
knowledge and opinions, in order to encourage further
research, as well as to contribute to a better general know-
ledge of the subject.

In Frankfurt, Dar al-Athar again availed itself of the
excellent opportunity to promote not only Islamic civiliza-
tion but also to throw light on the historic development of
Kuwait as a state. Although much of this history is only
sketchily known, Kuwait’s identity and its past has recently
become a subject of interest and discussion the world over.
A conference, held on Kuwait’s historic identity, at
Cambridge featured a number of important participants,
including such international scholars as Dr. B.J. Slot, author,
archivist, from The Netherlands; Prof. Dr. Ulrich Haarmann of the University of Kiel, Germany; and
Dr. G.L. Bondarevsky of the Russian Academy of Sciences,
Moscow, Russian Republic. Kuwaiti contributors were
Abdulrahman al-Ajmi, Advisor to the Minister of Foreign Affairs
Kuwait, and Prof. Mohammad al-Rumaili, editor of ‘Al-
Arabi’ magazine, Kuwait.

The State of Kuwait was in existence by the eighteenth
century. It featured an active merchant and seafaring com-


sea to the East and overland to the West.

In the course of its development, from simply being a
reciprocal exhibition to becoming a travelling exhibition;
Islamic Art and Patronage: Treasures from Kuwait has
become one of the best known cultural assets of modern
Kuwait. The collection has represented Kuwait internation-
ally since the Iraqi aggression and has helped to foster an
understanding and appreciation of our country.

The objects, in the exhibition and in the collection at
large, have been depicted and discussed by prominent
scholars in the field of Islamic art. Studies by Oleg Grabar,
Esin Atil, Marilyn Jenkins, Estelle Wheelan, Jonathan M.
Bloom, Sheila Blair, Walter Denny and Manuel Keene have
been published in a distinctive volume produced to accom-
ply the exhibition and printed in English, French, Dutch,
Russian and German, which is still available upon request.
One of the predominant topics in this work is the impact
patronage has had upon the Islamic arts, exemplified in Dar
al-Athar al-Islamiyyah.

Top: Abdulkarim al-Ghahban and Abdulrahman al-Ajmi, members of the DAR, who supervised the installation of
the exhibits, and at last found a moment to reflect on the beauty of the exhibition.
Bottom: Viewing the exhibits, Prof. Dr. AnneMarie Schimmel and Dr. Arnulf Herbst.
Africa: The Art of a Continent was the first comprehensive celebration of African Art ever held in Britain. Even more ambitiously, it was the first attempt anywhere in the world to mount a major exhibition of the spectacular artistic achievements of the continent as a whole. The exhibition carried the visitor on a journey through seven geographical zones, and Egypt and its neighbours to the north of the Sahara were considered in the context of Africa as a whole. A new emphasis was put on the often neglected art of the southern regions of the continent. The DAR was pleased to lend works to this extraordinary exhibit (notably LNS659S, a & g, and LNS350C).

This exhibition was held from 4 October, 1995 until 21 January, 1996 at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, and was shown again in Berlin from 1 March, until 1 May, 1996, at the Martin-Gropius-Bau.

As the probable birthplace of the human race, Africa has a cultural history of immense length, and this was emphasized by the exhibition. The exhibition's oldest artifact, a hand axe (a quartzite implement found in Tanzania) from the Olduvai Gorge, is the oldest known object to have been fashioned by a human being, has been dated back some 1.6 million years. The most recent objects in the exhibition were made within living memory (Zulu earplugs made in the 1950's).

Because the exhibition was occupied with such huge tracts of time and territory, it was necessarily selective, concentrating on the major civilizations. In some of these civilizations, Nigeria and Mali, for example, high culture has been continuous for over a millennium. The primary criteria in all cases was aesthetic quality, but the sequence of exhibits, as well as marking out a journey through the continent, also provided, via metaphors of its life and spiritual identity, a praise-poem of Africa. Although the content of the exhibition varied in scale, style and materials used in construction (clay, stone, ivory, wood, iron, bronze and gold), the show had a single purpose to unify its many themes; it asserted that in Africa, throughout the centuries, marvellous things were made.

The exhibits themselves were gathered from all over the...
world, from Europe, the U.S.A. and of course Africa itself. British collections, public and private, were well represented and an attempt was made to bring together again some of the works that belonged to pioneer collectors such as Jacob Epstein and Henry Moore.

The layout of the galleries corresponded to a map of Africa and visitors moved as if on a circular journey from Ancient Egypt down the East Coast to South Africa returning up the West Coast areas through the Congo and the Sahel to reach Islamic Egypt at the end via the lands north of the Sahara.

Sections of the exhibition were devoted to the art of the North African countries which have hitherto been excluded from exhibitions on African art. These included Egyptian art of all periods, from pre-dynastic through to the great masterpieces of Pharaonic times to their Coptic and Islamic successors; the glories of Carthage to the great Tunisian craftsmen of more recent times; the rock paintings found in Morocco which lie at the beginning of the story of art in Africa to the architectural and design movements that created the Moorish style in Africa and Spain. Also featured in the exhibit were pieces from Algeria and Libya.

The strength of African art lies in its sculpture which formed ninety percent of the exhibition, the remaining ten percent being provided by exceptional textiles and rock paintings. It included the great Igbo bronzes, haunting terracottas from Nok and Djenne, masterpieces from Benin and the breathtaking diversity of West African sculpture in wood and metal as well as the exquisite refinement of Southern African artifacts. All these were bracketed between two glimpses of the treasures of North Africa since the journey of the exhibition starts with the glories of Egyptian art of the predynastic period and ends with its later phase of Islamic opulence.

The exhibition was accompanied by a substantial catalogue. It covered the geographical, archaeological, historical and cultural background of the art and related the individual pieces to the people who made them.

The selection committee was chaired by Tom Phillips, member of the Royal Academy, who has himself been a collector of African art for over twenty years and has travelled widely in the continent. He was supported by a distinguished international committee of scholars and experts in the field, including John Mack, John Picton, Anthony Appiah and Eko Eyo who ensured that a fresh, yet authoritative, vision of African art emerged; and by the Royal Academy's own experts who have been responsible in recent years for great synoptic exhibitions of the art of different epochs and civilizations.
Carved panel, Egypt, Fatimid, 11th C., wood with traces of gesso. 32.9 x 152.7 cm, LNS555W.

Bowl with central blazon, Egypt, Mamluk, 14th C., earthenware with yellow slip, h. 25.3 cm, diam. 22.6 cm, LNS7C.

Circular tile with epigraphic blazon of Sultan Qutbey, Egypt, Mamluk, late 15th C., glazed earthenware, diam. 50 cm, LNS190C.
Dr. Oliver Watson has been the Chief Curator of the Department of Ceramics and Glass for the Victoria and Albert Museum in London since 1990. He has a Ph.D. in Persian Lustre Tiles of the 13th and 14th centuries and has written many books on Persian Lustre Wares. We at the DAR are always very happy to share his insights. The following is an abstract of a lecture presented by Dr. Watson on 13 June, 1996, in the atrium of the British Embassy in Kuwait at the invitation of the DAR.

The word “influence” is one of most abused in art-history. When things look alike, “influence” is the cause, and once seen, many historians think their task is over. In fact the word serves to hide and muddle a whole spectrum of different mechanisms, and it places the action in entirely the wrong place. X “influences” Y - but actually X does nothing, it is Y who

Plate 1 [LMS128C]
Dish, white glazed and painted in blue. Iraq, 9th C. A.D. The shape copies that of a Chinese imported porcelain, but the decoration is original.

Plate 2 [LMS655C]
“Sasanian-Islamic” Jar, turquoise glazed, Syria or Iraq, 7th to 9th C. A.D. A sturdy functional jar, with simple decoration.

Plates 3 [LMS116C] White-glazed earthenware with inscription painted in copper-green. Egypt, 9th to 10th C. A.D. The white glaze is inspired ultimately by Chinese imported porcelains, but by this period in Egypt the shape is a purely Islamic one taken from metalwork. Here green painting replaces the cobalt blue, which is only found in Iraq.

Plate 4: By Courtesy of the Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum, “Melolita” Jar, Italy (Facasa), about 1480 A.D. Though in purely Italian Renaissance style, the technical tradition of this ware can be traced back directly to Abbasid Iraq.
acts. Y learns, copies, is inspired, selects, appropriates, emulates, misunderstands, parodies, transforms, and elaborates.

Islamic pottery has far too long been underestimated in the history of world ceramics, holding a place where Chinese "influences" arrived and a range of pretty patterns developed, but had little impact on the major players in China and Europe. This is quite misleading. In brief, this essay will show how Islamic potters contributed directly to, rather than just "influenced," what are arguably the two most important ceramic traditions.

Here in Plate 1 (LNS12BC) we see a "classic" ninth century piece of so-called Samarra ware: a white bowl, painted with an off-centre, stark, calligraphic design in blue on an otherwise empty ground. An invention of potters working for the Abbasid court and cities, it is the starting point of two technical traditions which were to dominate ceramic production throughout the world during the next 1000 years. The interest lies not so much in the design, but in the technique: a ceramic with a white ground, painted with blue. Let us first examine why this ware looks the way it does. The story starts, as do so many ceramic stories, with China.

Late eighth century Islamic pottery was a thriving industry when Chinese imports are first recorded, but with modest artistic aims, serving the needs of kitchen and pantry. Glazed wares, their most ambitious products, were functional and usually crudely made; the glaze is there to make the vessels smooth and waterproof rather than for more artistic ends. (Plate 2 - LNS65C: "Sasano-Islamic" jar) Only occasionally was some vigorous decoration applied in emulation of metal work.

Two factors influenced the expansion of the local ceramic industry. The first was the growth of large cities in the first centuries of Islamic rule. Concentrated wealth, through manufacturing and trade, produced a large strata of middle-class entrepreneurs with sufficient wealth to indulge in some luxuries whose aims went beyond mere utility.

The second factor was the trade with China, which arose during the course of the eighth century and reached substantial proportions dur-
ing the ninth. Chinese porcelains and stonewares were introduced into the Middle East for the first time. These, to Islamic eyes, were astounding: hard, white, heavy and cold; like no pottery seen in the Islamic world before. It could be best likened to a hardstone, but was nowhere near as expensive, and had the added kudos of being foreign and exotic.

Local potters soon started to explore ways in which they might share the profits of this new enthusiasm. They first set out to make exact copies: the shapes, though new, presented no problems (for example, the common porcelain bowl with rolled rim, flaring walls and wide foot). But, the hard white porcelain clay covered with a thin transparent glaze couldn't be copied: the Islamic potters had neither the required clays nor the experience of the high firing temperatures. Instead, they used well known local materials to produce a counterfeit: a yellowish clay body, covered with an opaque white glaze (usually a tin-glaze). These copies could deceive the eye, but not the hand. Presumably, less expensive than the imports, they found a ready market. Before long, white wares were made throughout the Islamic world.

The potters were not content to mimic the Chinese wares. They developed their own interests in colour and pat-

Plate 9 - LNS2786. Earthenware dish, with incised and splashed decoration. Iran (perhaps Nishapur), 10th C. A.D. Running colour is here made into a decorative effect in its own right, but the pattern is established by incised lines.
tern. The most spectacular decoration developed was luster, a sophisticated technique which gave brilliant metallic reflections. The simple designs brushed in cobalt blue or other colours on the opaque white glaze represent the beginnings of an important tradition. Tin-glaze wares (adding tin oxide was the most common of several ways to make a white glaze) with painted decoration, especially in copper green and manganese purple (Plate 3 - LNS116C), spread quickly through the Near East to sites all around the Mediterranean coast.

This technique progressed into Europe. By the 14th century, the potteries at Malaga in the Islamic Kingdom of Spain had developed the making of tin-glazed lustre and blue-painted wares into an extraordinary industry. They supplied the Nasrid's spectacular Alhambra palace at Grenada with luxurious tableware, splendid tiles, and monumental vases. This production was taken by migrant potters into Christian Spain, particularly to Valencia where such wares have been made continuously up to the present day. But the styles are distinctive: no sign is seen of the distant Chinese inspiration, and after the fall of the Nasrids, even the characteristic Islamic patterns disappear. These Hispano-Moresque wares are one of the great glories of both Islamic and European ceramics. There was considerable export demand for them in Europe and in Italy, especially. Here, large numbers were imported into the wealthy cities of the Renaissance.

Shipped through the Island of Majorca, they acquired the name Maiolica, which was subsequently given to the whole family of Italian wares in the same technique. Maiolica was produced in many centres, Faenza being the most prolific and famous, from the 15th century onwards (Plate 4 - Maiolica jar). Fashion for these wares spread up into Europe, where itinerant craftsmen set up potteries. The painting styles and vessel shapes, by now, reflect nothing of their Abbasid Empire origins, but the technique of making an earthenware with opaque white glaze and painted decoration is testimony to an unbroken thread stretching back to the medieval period in the heart of the Islamic world. The “realness” of this tradition is shown by way the technique was carried by potters themselves, moving from country to country taking their expertise with them, often on the invitation of patrons anxious to establish a luxury industry for themselves in France where it is called “Faience” after the Italian centre; Delftware after the Dutch wares; and further north still. By the early 18th century, tin-glaze potters supplied the whole of Europe with its luxury pottery (Plate 8 - English tin-glazed dish).

This establishes the Samarra ware as the source for one of the world's great ceramic traditions. What is the other? For this we...

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Plate 5 - By Courtesy of the Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum, Tin-glazed dish with painted decoration. England, mid 17th C. A.D. Tin-glaze wares remained in use in Europe's luxury ceramics until the 18th C. A.D., when the secrets of porcelain were discovered, and industrial manufacture developed.

Plate 6 - LNS5355. Bowl with underglaze-painted decoration. Iran (Sistan), about 1200-1210 A.D. It was the potters of Kashan who first discovered how to fix colours under a transparent glaze without causing them to run. This is perhaps the major technical achievement of the medieval period.

Plate 7 - LNS7695. Chinese blue-and-white porcelain dish. Early 15th C. A.D. This dish bears a mark indicating that it once belonged to the Indian Mughal Shah Jahan (1628-1707 A.D.). However, it had probably been exported westwards when new, and survived as a prized possession through many generations.
must follow not the technique of making and decorating, but the cobalt-blue pigment itself, and we must trace its progress not West, but East.

Cobalt-blue, used since antiquity in the Middle East as a colourant for glass and glazes, continued in the Islamic period. The mines in the mountains behind Kashan, in central Iran, were the major source for the pigment. It is here that we see a major technical breakthrough in its use. In the first centuries of the Islamic period, potters found ceramic colours difficult to manage; their glazes tended to run, blurring any pattern. The use of an opaque white glaze prevented this, providing a stable background on which simple decoration might be painted. However, these glazes were expensive because of the tin-oxide they used, and simpler transparent glazes tended to run badly. A variety of methods were used to fix a pattern: thick slip pigments, incised or moulded decoration and the like. The running colour found use as a decorative technique in its own right (Plate 5 - LNS278C). In about the year 1200, the potters at Kashan discovered a transparent glaze that did not run.
They painted their designs under the coating of transparent glaze: underglaze painting had been discovered. The colours most used were black, and cobalt blue (Plate 6 - LNS35C).

The Chinese, somewhat later, were also interested in developing painted decoration for their plain white porcelains. The Middle East provided one of their main export markets, so it is not surprising that they also looked there for technical hints. There they found both, underglaze painting and the colour blue. These married to their porcelains, developed into perhaps the single most dominant and famous class of ceramic ever known: blue and white (Plate 7 - LNS769C). This most characteristic of all Chinese wares has its origin in an Islamic technique and an Iranian material, for initially the cobalt-blue itself was imported from the Middle East.

The blue and white industry developed by the Chinese was truly enormous in its scale and impact. Vast quantities were shipped back Westwards, where its Middle Eastern origin was unrecognised or soon forgotten. From the 14th century onwards, Middle Eastern potters copied the Chinese import (Plate 8 - LNS369C; Plate 9 - LNS107C), still painting in underglaze with cobalt blue. They were still not able to make a hard porcelain body but used their lower-fired wares (here the Chinese still had an advantage).

Somewhat later, from the 17th century onwards, Chinese blue-and-white porcelains began to reach Europe in considerable quantities where, as in the Middle East, local potters began to make copies. Not knowing how to make hard porcelain, what technique did they use? Tin-glazed earthenware. (Plate 10 - English Dish)

The circle has been completed. Here are Europeans using a technique, whose sources can be traced right back to ninth century Abbasid “Samarra” wares, to copy the Chinese product. The inspiration for this “typical” Chinese porcelain is also to be traced, though by every different route, back to the very same Islamic ware.

Surely historians can no longer pretend that the Islamic potter only played a small role in the history of World ceramics.

Plate 9 LNS107C. Dish with polychrome painting. Turkey (Iznik), mid-16th C. A.D. The Turkish potters have here copied a Chinese original more than one hundred years old, of which several examples were in the Topkapi Palace Collection at the time. Other colours are used in addition to blue.

Plate 10 By Courtesy of the Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum. Tin-glazed dish painted in blue. England, about 1630 A.D. This piece is a close copy of an imported Chinese porcelain. It uses one Islamic technical tradition – painted tin-glazed pottery – to copy another – underglaze painting in blue – many hundreds of years after they had both been discovered in the Islamic world.
The Cultural Role of Calligraphy and Calligraphers

Calligraphy is the most 'Islamic' of all arts and expresses the spirit of Islam most perfectly. A saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad: "Whoever writes the bismillah beautifully will go to Paradise."

For this reason, innumerable people practiced the art of writing, especially after the Arabs learned the art of paper making from the Chinese in 751. With the advent of paper, it became much easier to write this sensitive writing which, up to that time, had been written partly on papyrus and partly on other materials.

The name of the vizier Ibn Muqla is well-known, for he gave geometrical rules to the Arabic letters, and his rules were applied to cursive writing everywhere in the Muslim world except for medieval and post-medieval Maghrib, Morocco and Spain. Those who followed the rules of Ibn Muqla would practice one letter until it was perfect, whereas, the North Africans would immediately write the whole word. His calligraphy was the quintessential art of Islam, many people from all walks of life tried to learn it: religious scholars, dervishes and rulers were all calligraphers.

It is mentioned that the art of calligraphy goes back to Ali b. Abi Talib. Many kings, from the Ibn Badis in North Africa, to the Safavid rulers, and in particular the Ottoman sultans, were famous masters of calligraphy. Women, too, are known for playing a role in outstanding calligraphic work, Judah al-Katiba was one of the best known calligraphers and writers of the 12th century.
It appears that many calligraphers in the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries were mobile, wandering east or west, wherever they found a wonderful new patron. For example, in the west, from Tunisia in North Africa, there is an inscription that appears to be in an eastern Kufic style. Was the master a native of Tunisia or was he a man who came from the east?

The same thing strikes us when we look at an architectural Kufic inscription in a central Afghan mosque, dated 1165; the particular thing about it is how the word “Allah” is written in Kufic style with a star and double star between the two letters. Exactly the same pattern is found at almost the same time in the windows of al-jalarih complex in Saragosa, Spain. Is it the common feeling of the beauty of calligraphy that inspired the two calligraphers or is it one calligrapher who executed the two works?

Now and then, we find people of the lower classes becoming calligraphers. One of the most beautiful stories is that of an Iranian calligrapher whose father was a cook. The boy used to bring food to a calligrapher master who gave classes to the sons of well to do families. None of them became very good, but the son of the cook became so interested and enthusiastic by what he saw that he left his father’s shop. He became one of the most famous calligraphers of the 15th century! He married the daughter of his master and the calligraphy went on in the family.

Mir Ali Harawi, was a famous calligrapher who was abducted by the Uzbeks and spent the rest of his life in the library in Bukhara. He wrote sad little poems about his imprisonment, as he called it, likening the letters to chains about his legs that they would not allow him to escape. Pages of his work are in every museum in the east and in the west, and he was very generous with his students. One of his students would bring in his own work and ask his master to sign it with his own name, which he did. This explains a great number of the calligraphies under his name.

Calligraphers played an important role as part and parcel of the management of the government. Great calligraphers were charged with copying the Qur’an and books of poetry. Some were charged with copying the Divans of great masters.

We have an exact account of how long it took a calligrapher to copy the holy Qur’an, some needed one month, other took a whole year or more to copy a Mushaf. Not only the official calligraphers did that, but also many of the sultans and kings who did it mainly to gain some spiritual benefits by copying the divine words.

It is said in the classical works that whoever looks at many of the family trees of the calligraphers would find that they all go back to Ali Ibn Abi Tallit, the cousin of the Prophet. A special kind of Kufic is ascribed to him.

Poets and writers loved to use illusions, their shape and their numerical value; and Sufis would like to explain their deeper meaning, such as alif pointing to God’s unity and mim to the Prophet. Many calligraphers were honoured by the rulers, and praised because one believed that a beautiful writing points to a beautiful character.
The seasonal rains have been plentiful the last few years in Kuwait. Der al-Athar al-Hamijah has also enjoyed a similar deluge—in the form of gifts for the library. Our many friends have made these thoughtful gestures, and they are truly appreciated. Their kind consideration for the restoration and improvement of the library will be of benefit to many scholars, now and in future.


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The Art of Lacquer in the Islamic World
An abstract of a lecture given by Professor Geza Fehervari

There is a general misconception that Islamic lacquer and Chinese lacquer are the same thing. At a lecture for the DAR held at Bayt Lothan on 17 March, 1956, Prof. Fehervari showed that they are not. Professor Fehervari was appointed Ambassador to Kuwait and other Gulf States for the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1992. He retired in the summer of 1995 and joined the Tareq Rajab Museum as Curator in September of that year. He has authored several works on Islamic art.

There is a general misconception, that Islamic lacquer had its roots in Far Eastern, mainly in Chinese, art and that it was introduced to the Islamic World only in the 16th and 17th centuries. That, however, is not so. First of all, Islamic lacquer had its roots in Egyptian and Byzantine crafts rather than in Far Eastern models. Professor Ernst Grube was the first to point out the basic difference between Far Eastern and Islamic lacquer. He stated that: "While in China true lacquer was used as the painting medium, in the Muslim East it would appear that the painting itself was never carried out in lacquer. Rather, a surface to be decorated with what is generally called 'lacquer painting' but should more correctly be called lacquered (or varnished) painting, was coated with a chalk or gypsum base. This basic coating was covered with a tinted varnish that came close to being lacquer and which can at times actually be called lacquer. On this lacquer or varnish base the design was painted, first in gold (in 13th C. Anatolia, 15th C. Herat, 16th-17th C. Turkey), later in polychrome tempera (16th-17th C. Iran and India) and, in still later times (18th to 20th C.) in water colours."

Persian artists, nevertheless, were familiar with true lacquer from early Islamic times onwards. Professor Mohammad Yousef Kiani, who is now the Head of the Institute of Archaeology at the University of Teheran carried out research on the subject and he found that, in Persian the word lak or laki was used for a material produced from both vegetal and insect substances. Vegetal lak was made from the sap of a tree, while the insect version was collected from the fluid of a red insect called germez. Professor Kiani pointed out that the word lak denotes a colouring or painting, or a coating material used to protect objects, especially those made from wood. But in Persian the word also means "a red pigment used by painters." This would suggest that it was used not only as the protective layer, identified by Professor Grube, but also as a painting medium.

But lacquer was not only known in Iran, it was also at home in the Arab world. The excavations at Fustat and more recently at Quṣayr al-Qadīm, on the Red Sea, brought to light lacquered objects, boxes and decorated panels. Al-Maqriti, the famous Mamluk historian, who lived in Cairo at the beginning of the 15th century recorded, that in the former Fatimid palace of Sultan al-Hakim,
Accordingly, we have also written evidence that lacquer was used as a protective material and also as a pigment.

In our excavations at Ghubayra, in Kirman Province, Iran we brought to light a small fragment of a wooden box, which was lacquered and then painted in red and black, while the decoration was incised under the protective layer of lak (fig. 1). The most significant discovery, however, took place at the famous Seljuq caravanserai of Robat-e Sharaf, some 120 km east of Mashhad, where during the restoration in 1978 two fragments of a circular box were discovered (fig. 2). The box is decorated with seven seated human figures, all of them musicians. They are shown in a curious way. The upper part of their bodies are drawn in frontal position, while their lower parts are in profile. Such a representation appears on a bronze casket which is in the British Museum, London. It was made by a certain Ahmad ibn al-Faqih, who was active during the first half of the 13th century. The lacquered wooden box from Robat-e Sharaf can also be dated to the late 12th or early 13th century.

Another early outstanding lacquerwork is in Turkey, a Qur'an stand, or rahl, which is in the Maulana Museum at Konya, bearing the date of 677 A.H./1278 A.D. It seems

Fig 2. Fragment of a lacquered and richly decorated wooden box, Seljuq period, late 12th - early 13th C. It was discovered during restoration work in the caravansarai of Robat-e Sharaf, on the Silk Road, some 120km east of Mashhad.
medium for artists. There is a beautiful lacquerwork in the library of the Wellcome Institute in London, which is the binding of Ibn Sina's (Avicenna's) Canon, produced in Iran, and dated 1042 A.H./1632 A.D.

From the early 17th century onward, entire rooms were covered with lacquered panels in Iran, Turkey and also in Syria. When Isfahan became the capital of the Safavid Empire towards the end of the 16th century, the doors and windows of the palaces, or the interior walls and ceilings of some rooms, were covered with richly decorated lacquered works. One of the outstanding artists of the second half of the 17th century was Muhammad Zaman, who excelled in lacquer paintings. One of his large qalamdans, which is in the Keir Collection, Richmond, Surrey, bears his signature and the date of 1073 A.H./1663 A.D.

The Qajar ruler Fath Ali Shah (1193 A.H./1797 A.D. - 1250 A.H./1834 A.D.) was a great patron of the arts, in particular painting and lacquerwork. He frequently appears on large oil paintings and on lacquer objects, like the example on a large casket where the Shah is shown taking part on a hunting expedition (fig. 4). A large qalamdan depicts him in court, surrounded by attendants (fig. 5). Both objects can be dated to the late 18th or early 19th century and are preserved in the Maryam Masoudi Collection.

There were several outstanding Iranian artists during the 19th century, who were working in lacquer. One of them was Sadeq, who produced beautiful mirror-cases, qalamdans and bookbindings. His earliest known work is a mirror-case, dated 1204 A.H./1789 A.D. Several of his works are preserved in museums and private collections.

An interesting and popular type of lacquered object were the small pen-boxes, which in Persian are called Jay-e Chasb. Actually they were not used as pen-boxes, but rather letter boxes in which love letters were sent. The illustrated small pen-box was most likely the work of Mustafa Shirazi, who was active during the first half of the 19th century. Another well-known artist was Najaf, who was active during the mid-19th century. A beautiful mirror-case, which is in the N.D. Khalili Collection, in London, bears his signature and it may be dated to the middle of the 19th century.

Lacquer painting became even more popular in Iran towards the end of the 19th century and this art form survives and continues in the country up to the present day.