About the journal

Hadeeth ad-Dar is a publication of the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah. Every year, the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah organises a series of lectures known as the Cultural Season. Hadeeth ad-Dar was created to share these lectures with academic and cultural institutions and Friends of the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah around the world. Cultural Season 19 will get underway in September 2013 and, as with previous years, will present scholars in a wide variety of fields related to arts and culture in the Islamic world.

The Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah (DAI) is a government cultural organisation based on a Kuwaiti private art collection. Since its inception in 1983, DAI has grown from a single focus organisation created to manage the loan of the prestigious al-Sabah Collection of art from the Islamic world to the State of Kuwait to become an internationally recognised cultural organisation.

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LNS 4969 J and LNS 4970 J
Two gold masks from composite sculptures
Fabricated from gold sheet
Western Iran, late 7th to early 6th century BCE
Height 8 cm; width 10.5 cm (LNS 4969 J)
Height 6.5 cm; width 8.2 cm (LNS 4970 J)
Seals and seal stamps have had a long and rich history in Islamic cultural and artistic traditions. For many centuries, they have been produced in metal, stone, and other materials. They have been considered powerful because of two distinct but related factors: first, because they are used to impress an imperial mark, and, second, because they function as amulets. As a mark of power and rulership, the seal joins the ranks of the royal emblems of the crown and throne (J. Deny and V. Porter). Moreover, the seal often functions like an amulet or talisman and therefore carries the potential to protect and cure. In the latter case, the seal’s power derives not from its status as a royal or personal mark but rather as an item linked to the esoteric sciences. As a result, seals and seal designs are essentially bivalent in that they act as symbols of authority and power as well as graphic designs that are believed to preserve an individual from harm, trouble, and illness.

The history of seals stretches back to the beginning of Islam and to the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, who is recorded as having used a signet ring to both sign and seal his official correspondence, especially his letters to Byzantine and Sassanian rulers. His signet ring, or khatam, is described in a number of textual sources as made of silver and bearing either a silver or agate bezel containing three lines of text that read “Muhammad is the Messenger of God” (Muhammad Rasul Allah). (V. Porter et al.). The Prophet’s ring does not survive today, although its impression is visible on a parchment letter now held in Topkapi Palace, Istanbul. (H. Aydin).

In the Hadith, the Prophet’s companions narrate that Muhammad used his silver ring to stamp letters but that he would not wear the ring per se. (Y. Naâhani). If this indeed had been the case, then one could imagine that he held the ring between his fingers and pressed it down to make a seal impression on official correspondence. From a structural and functional perspective, then, it is not entirely different from later Islamic seals. For example, a Safavid personal seal stamp made in Iran also is made of silver, and it, too, was used to seal a document with its owner’s name, thereby helping to impress an authenticated mark of authority.

Despite such similarities between Muhammad’s signet ring and the Safavid seal stamp, there remain notable differences. First, the Safavid seal stamp is not worn on the finger. Instead, it includes a vertical post with a hole pierced in the top globular section, through which a string would have been looped, thereby enabling its suspension to an object or garment. Second, its inscription is more elaborate as it includes the owner’s name encircled by an inscription written in Arabic. Regularly appearing in Shi’i Iranian seal stamps, the inscription is known as the Nad-i ‘Ali or “Calling Upon ‘Ali.” It reads as follows: “I call upon ‘Ali, the Manifestor of Miracles (mazhar al-a‘i‘a‘ib). You shall find in him help in adversity. All grief and sorrow will disappear through his trusteeship (wilayya). Oh ‘Ali, oh ‘Ali, oh ‘Ali.” The Nad-i ‘Ali invokes Imam ‘Ali to secure his protection and intercession, demonstrating how such seals were used in practices of seeking miraculous assistance according to a particular religious worldview—whether it be expressed in Sunni or Shi’i terms.

Beyond their ability to dispatch a number of political and religious messages, seals and seal impressions are also believed to bear protective powers, especially when held in the hand or else pinned to the body. The widespread belief in their shielding potential may in part explain why the Safavid stamp seal could have hung on its owner’s body and why other coin-like amulets are similarly pierced with holes so that they could be suspended or sewn onto clothing (Porter et al.). From the shape of the seal to its textual contents, such items were perceived as defensive devices that could be doubly effective in that they harnessed the power of both form and word. The seals’ perceived efficacy, no doubt, could be further heightened if carried on or close to the physical body.

Seals were made in copious quantities in Dar-al-Islam, and Ottoman lands were no exception to the rule. A number of objects survive that attest to the popularity of seals within Turkish spheres during the modern period in particular. Besides the ample material evidence, Ottoman Turkish historical texts and travelogues pay attention to the topic. For instance, the famous writer Evliya Çelebi (d. 1682) records in his “Book of Travels” (Seyahatname) that there existed a thriving business of making seals in seventeenth-century Istanbul. He states that there were many engravers who produced stone and silver seals and amulets, and that these Ottoman amulet-makers formed part of a larger guild that comprised forty members occupying fifteen stores. Additionally, Çelebi notes that these artisans produced a wide variety of seals that were inscribed with Qur’anic verses, placed within various geometric shapes as well as arranged in magic squares. Artisans also produced representations of well-known seals, including Muhammad’s seal of prophecy, the seal of Solomon, and the seal of the Great Name of God (Deny and F. Maddison and E. Savage-Smith). Seals thus were made of a variety of materials, combined textual and graphic elements in their designs, and were produced in no small quantities in the Ottoman capital.

Beyond catering to a varied clientele, seals migrated from the realm of objecthood to the field of graphic design. Indeed, seals gained a “second life” in Ottoman book and textile arts from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. Within the field of paper production, there exist various books and scrolls that include seal designs, which complement texts describing these seals’ beneficial properties (H. Tezcan and idem). These seal designs could be used as templates for their application to other materials, most especially talismanic shirts and illustrated prayer books, which were especially popular among members of the Ottoman elite. From books to shirts, the seal was thus transformed from a material object to a graphic sign applied to a variety of flat surfaces, where it came to

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function as a protective and curative device. Whether worn on the body or else carried in the hand, seals were interacted with in highly tactilic ways, and it is precisely through physical engagements that the power of seal designs were believed to be activated by their Ottoman viewers and carriers.

Of paramount importance among the three named seals is the so-called seal of Muhammad’s prophecy (muhr al-nubuwwa). Textual sources state that the Prophet bore a mark of apostleship on his back between his shoulder blades. Some of Muhammad’s companions described the mark as a mole or protuberance, while others state that it looked like a cupping glass, a pigeon’s egg, or the mark left behind by a leech. Regardless of its shape, and whether it was acquired in his youth or during his celestial ascension, Muhammad’s seal of prophecy was thought of as a concrete, recognizable mark of divinely granted prophecy and purity on his physical body.

Seal designs that depict Muhammad’s seal of prophecy appear frequently in Ottoman devotional manuals, which combine verses from the Qur’an and prayers written in both Arabic and Ottoman Turkish. In such miscellanies, the muhr al-nubuwwa appears drawn in two variant shapes as well as framed by Muhammad’s names and inscribed with the shahada (E. Wright).

Often, it is circular and thus may recall a mole, while at other times it appears as an elongated omphalos or the mark left behind by a leech. Regardless of its shape, and whether it was acquired in his youth or during his celestial ascension, Muhammad’s seal of prophecy was thought of as a concrete, recognizable mark of divinely granted prophecy and purity on his physical body.

Alongside its graphic representation and pious inscriptions, the image of Muhammad’s seal of prophethood is sometimes preceded by an Ottoman Turkish text providing the reader directions on how to touch the design in order to activate its protective qualities. For example, one Ottoman prayer book dated 1808 includes a design of the seal of prophecy, inscribed with a promise to its owner: “Go wherever you wish, for verily you are well protected” (N. Safwat).

Another, dated 1877, tells its reader that, “whoever rubs the seal on his face morning and night will be absolved from eighty years of sins; and whoever looks at the seal at the beginning of the month will be safe from all misfortune” (N. Safwat). Here, the pressing and rubbing of the seal on the viewer’s face is believed to activate the emblem’s healing and protective powers.

Like Muhammad’s seal of prophecy, the seal of Solomon attests to Solomon’s utmost rank and his authority. Solomon could control humans, jinn, and the winds thanks to the abilities given to him by God. A sign of this divine gift—that is, the seven signs of God—were engraved in a star-shaped hexagon into his signet ring (E. Doutté and W. Budge). Essentially a six-pointed star, the seal of Solomon also was intended as a representation of the seal of the great name of God (al-ism al-'azam) (J. Dawkins).

As a quintessential emblem of sovereignty, power, and protection derived from the great name of God, the seal of Solomon was one of the most popular seals in Ottoman lands. According to Evliya Çelebi, it was considered so powerful that it was sometimes designed onto the walls of Ottoman fortresses, acting as a defensive bonus when bricks and stones were thought insufficient (E. Çelebi). Moreover, the seal of Solomon often appears as a six-pointed star in portable coin-seals and talismanic shirts, as seen in Figure 1. Produced in multiple media, this particular seal acts as a “praiseworthy method” (al-tariqa al-mahmuda) of seeking protection by containing the spirits, as Solomon did, by trusting, obeying, and supplicating the One True God (E. Özbilgen and Porter). This kind of practice comprised a licit or “white” form of magic, in which seal-like devices were regarded not as magical implements but rather graphic devices that helped seek insurance from God. As such, the Solomonic star was understood as a graphic channel toward securing divine dispensation rather than a device used in the performance of black magic.

Beyond architecture, talismanic shirts, and portable coin seals, the seal of Solomon counts among the most popular seal designs included in late Ottoman illustrated prayer books. In these devotional manuscripts, it is never just a six-pointed star that is left unmediated by a written text. To the contrary, it is always supplemented by highly legible passages that praise God and the Prophet Muhammad. At times, the seal is surrounded by the so-called beautiful names of God (al-asma’ al-husna), which call out God through his many epithets and attributes. At other times, the asma’ al-husna are themselves inscribed into concentric seals, with text registers above and below informing their viewers that gazing upon such diagrams will protect them from calamities and illness, including the plague.

Seals dedicated to the prophets include only Muhammad and Solomon, their respective marks coming together to represent the intertwined notions of prophethood and rulership. To my knowledge, no other seal designs were devised for the other prophets, such as Adam, David, Moses, and Jesus. Rather, the great majority of seal designs believed to contain protective and curative powers? And, if so, how could these powers be “activated”? To a certain extent, short texts embedded in Ottoman illustrated prayer books can help answer these questions. These texts precede or face the seals and give directions on how to use them. Moreover, they prove that these seals were, first, believed to be blessed; second, that they were thought to contain protective and curative powers; and third, that these powers had to be activated in physically interactive ways.

One such text faces a seal that is included in an Ottoman illustrated prayer book produced in 1872. The double-page folio displays the seal design on the left and a facing text on the right. The diagram is identified as representing the great seal of God. Its interior is divided into four hemispherical areas at the corners of which appear the names of the four archangels Gabriel, Michael, ‘Azra’il, and Israfil. Throughout the interiors of the roundel, and within the four hemispheres, the expression “Ya Allah” (Oh God) is inscribed repeatedly. Here, a litany of pious oral invocations of God is written as text and shaped as a bezel.

The diagram’s facing text provides the reader with clear indications on how to use the great seal of God. Written in the Ottoman Turkish vernacular with which its reader would have felt most comfortable, the text states that: “Whoever reads this blessed great seal or carries it with himself or rubs it against his face in the evening and morning will be forgiven seventy years of sin. Also, whoever looks at this blessed seal on the first day of the month will be saved from all the misfortunes by the permission of God. Furthermore, may God forgive whosoever doubts this blessed seal. There are many explanations for this seal; here we
The study tries to examine why oriental carpets are the way they are. This is far from being a definitive interpretation. It is only a collection of thoughts, reflections and ideas on the subject.

A carpet is a floor cover made up of usually wool, with a weaving structure that tries to imitate an animal skin, with the warp and weft as the pelt and the pile as the fur. Like animal skins it is used for warmth, its heavy weaves providing insulation from the cold.

As the use of wool in carpet weaving indicates an origin in a herding society with an ample supply of wool, and as the need for warmth points to areas with a cold climate, it is very probable that carpet weaving may have originated in the Steppes areas of Central Asia with the Turkic nomadic tribes that still produce some of the best weavings ever. It created for them a rich warm indoor garden as a counteraction to the harsh climate outside.

However, the identification of carpet weaving with gardens, and the sophistication of the carpet weaving techniques point out to sedentary societies with ample time and leisure to grow and tend gardens. Carpets have qualities that respond to both suppositions, and we are left with a dilemma as to the real origin of this art. Is it a nomadic art? Is it an art of sedentary communities? Or is it nomadic product that has developed in villages and towns?

Historical Overview:

The earliest complete carpet known is the Pazyryk, discovered frozen in the tomb of a prince, and dated to 5th CE. This carpet has a high Persian knot count, a developed weaving technique and a very sophisticated design, placing it at the end of a long tradition of rug weaving. In fact some earlier existing examples carbon dated to 7th BC.

The “Spring of Khosroes” is a very large carpet covering the floor of the audience hall of the palace of Khosroes at Ctesiphon. It was a superlative carpet, designed as a garden with gold, pearls and gems woven into it. According to contemporary witnesses it was taken as booty by the conquering Arab armies in 7th CE and subdivided into pieces amongst them.

No examples of carpets survived till a group of fragments, found in Central Anatolia, were identified and dated to 13th CE and nominated as “Seljuk Carpets”. Seljuk carpets were mentioned and described by Marco Polo in 1271 as the best carpets in the world.

From the 15th and 16th CE comes a group of “Cairene” carpets of a highly sophisticated geometrically based design, a fine weave and a limited color palette. These carpets have the particularity of their yam being z spun, unlike other yarns, which are invariably s spun. As all Coptic textiles are also z spun, an origin in Cairo seems most likely. Some of the carpets woven in Turkey during this same period found their way to the west and were depicted in contemporary paintings. These carpets were typed and named after the artists who depicted them, notably Hans Holbein.

Dr. Samir Rebeiz
Presented
3 December, 2012

Islamic Gardens As Depicted In Carpets

The premium is always placed on the integrity of the written word, legible and uncorrupted even when formed into an abstract seal design. Whether held in the hand or pressed upon the body, Ottoman seals functioned as intermediary vehicles for orally praising God and, as blessed items; their spiritual proximity to the written word.

Over and again, one cannot fail to notice that these seals are neither ciphers nor cryptographs. The premium is always placed on the integrity of the written word, legible and uncorrupted even when formed into an abstract seal design.

In conclusion, it is clear that Ottoman seal designs provided authoritative marks and protective devices for their weavers and beholders. Exiting the material spheres of rings and stamps, such designs entered book and textile arts from the sixteenth century onward. In many Ottoman devotional prayer books and talismanic shirts, a wide variety of seal designs can be found, including the seal of Muhammad’s prophecy, the seal of Solomon, the seal of God’s great name, and various other seals that include Qur’anic excerpts and pious supplications. These portable seals were thought to bear protective and curative powers that could be unleashed by their owners’ physical and spiritual proximity to the written word.

This single-folio text is intriguing for a number of reasons. First, the reader is told that there exist many explanations of the great seal of God and that this short text represents merely a synopsis, or mukhtasar. This sentence is quite valuable insomuch as it indicates that there were other, more elaborate texts describing this kind seal that were written and available to an Ottoman reading public, thus attesting to how common this seal and its related explanation, or sharh, must have been. Second, the text makes it clear that the seal is not just a pictogram devoid of powers. Rather, it is to be considered a blessed imprint. Saturated with latent sacred powers, the seal can be activated in order to forgive man of his sins and to save him from calamity.

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The Golden Age of carpet production was in 16th CE Persia, under the rule of Shah Abbas the Great. Some of the greatest carpets ever produced in this era. The examples that have survived are palpable evidence of this. Of these great carpets the “Ardebil” Carpet, the “Emperor” carpet, the “Poldi-Pezzol” carpet, the “Chelsea” carpet, to name but a few. With their exquisite design and workmanship, and imposing size they are the jewels of the Islamic carpet collections of great museums.

During later centuries, carpet production declined in quality and quantity. The only notable items being the carpets produced in Central Persia to be offered as gifts to foreign dignitaries. Small size carpets in silk and brocade, named “Polonaise” because a number of them were discovered in Polish collections, and larger size items named “Portuguese” due to the depiction of Portuguese sailors and ships in the spandrels of the carpets.

The Flower:

Carpets as we know them today are a product of Islamic Art. The design of all carpets is always a garden. This garden represents the image of paradise, and its main design element is always the flower.

Islam did not originate from a void, as fundamentalists like us to believe. Islamic culture is the culmination of a long period of human development and its arts are a continuation of the culture and arts of preceding periods. The significance of the flower goes back to the earliest civilizations and seems to have played a role in the solar-based agricultural life cycle. This cycle comprises the concepts of birth, life, death and rebirth again in the next spring. The flower is the catalyst of rebirth. This is evident in the Egyptian myth of Isis and Osiris. Modern Egyptians still celebrate the rebirth of Osiris in their celebration of “Shamm el Naseem” in early spring. Shamm el Naseem being the Arabic name of the freesia flower.

The Mesopotamian also emphasizes the concept of rebirth after death in the flood myth, which was later adopted by the Jews in the Old Testament. The classical religions had a great many Gods reborn as flowers: Narcissus, Anemone, and Iris, to name but a few, with the rebirth always happening in early spring. The Zoroastrians, and later the Persians celebrated, and still do, their New Year in early spring with a great show of flowers. And in Christianity, the death and the resurrection of Christ takes place in early spring.

With Islam, all this changed. A lunar one replaced the solar-based year. Arts assumed a strongly non-representational character, all the while embracing the dematerialization of surface as the major design principle. In carpets, the design elements were almost always vegetative and carpets took their actual form as gardens, embodying the Islamic image of paradise. Carpets are designed like ideal oriental gardens. In fact the names of the different elements of a carpet design are synonymous with their respective names in landscape design. Carpets reintegrated these ideal gardens indoors, and into the shelter. The multi sensory experience of the combination of all these became now complete, as these arts can be experienced on a simulation of a garden, i.e.: The Carpet.

The Complex and the Abstract

Early Classical period Persian court carpets were extremely sophisticated in weaving and design. Their design used intricate curvilinear forms coupled with a spectacular color range to create volumetric three-dimensional effects. They further used the harmony of these forms and colors to achieve a magnificently rich whole. The development of the classical design of medallion carpets resulted in a standardized layout in which the significance of the different design elements, forms and colors is metamorphosed, and becomes the actual structure of the design of the carpet.

The further simplification of this process led to the creation of a basic vocabulary of forms and colors particular to each carpet type woven in its own culturally autonomous area. The abstraction of this vocabulary and the suppression of all the redundant elements of design resulted in an extremely simplistic expression composed only of lines, shapes and planes of color, which to the uninitiated can be easily confused with primitivism.

Carpets, as we know them today, are the result of a long process of development. Even the most “primitive” looking examples coming from really remote areas are deceptive, as their designs and motifs are nothing but the result of this process of development. The meanings of designs, motifs and color being transmitted from generation to generation by the weavers, and having their origins in the collective consciousness of the society. Many researchers on the subject have, unfortunately, fallen for this misconception. We cannot, even with difficulty, imagine what a primitive carpet may have looked like. In reality, the coexistence in contemporaneous carpets of diverse representations and symbols for the same thought or idea enforces the fact that what looks like “primitive” is in actually nothing but abstraction.

To further clarify this concept, we will examine three carpet types:

The Turcoman Gul

Turcoman Guls are different representations of flowers, “Gul” being the Turkic word for flower. Every tribe had its own particular “Gul - flower” which was the heraldic symbol of that tribe. When weaving, these “Guls” became the basic element of the design of the carpet filling its field in rows in a regular pattern. The shifted interspaces between the rows is further filled with secondary “Guls” representing a minor tribe, in many cases that of the wife, in a very heraldic spirit.

The Turcoman could very well be considered the originators of carpet weaving. They have produced, and are still producing, some of the most superlative weaving ever. Their carpets exhibit a mastery of technique and handling never surpassed. The layout and design of most, if not all, Turcoman carpets is exceedingly pure, minimalist and abstract. The design being only “Guls” laid out in rows, and the colors, only shades of madder red with complimenting black and white. If other colors are used, they are used very sparingly.

What the Turcoman did with basically one design, the “Gul”, and one color, red, is incredible. Turcoman carpets are the epitome of fine proportion, balanced layout, organized space, exquisite pattern and vibrant color. They contain, as well, a wealth of symbols and variations. All this is the outcome of a long process of the selective consciousness and the unconscious quest for abstraction.
The Herati or Mahi Pattern

This is a very popular pattern in carpet weaving, and has been used extensively as a major or as the only design element in the field design of carpets. The pattern consists basically of a lozenge shaped design surrounding a flower. Two opposing pairs of “Shah Abbas” style palmettes emanate from the four corners of each lozenge. These lozenge arrangements are placed in alternate rows and in a quincunx formation all over the field of the carpet. The residual interspaces are filled in with confronting pairs of “Saz” leaves that resemble fish, hence the name “Mahi”, which is the word for fish in Persian.

The pattern is believed to have originated in the region of Herat, and to have been a derivative of the repetitve field designs, as manifested in Turcoman and other similarly designed carpets. The creation of this versatile pattern with its never-ending variants and possibilities is very interesting. By the repetitive and staggered placing of rows of similar elements, and a judicious choice of color, we can achieve a wide scope of pattern within pattern as well as all sorts of pattern groupings. We can also achieve interesting three-dimensional effects. Like Turcoman carpets, the designers have managed to achieve much with very little design material.

The garden represented here is an orchard, representing its repetitiveness of planting, and the system of planting in staggered rows. The Herati pattern developed late, only appearing in examples from the early 19th CE. The Herati or Mahi pattern is found in rural and town-produced carpets, and has been woven in all qualities from the very fine to the commercially rough.

Prayer Rugs

Although prayer rugs were woven to serve a specific purpose, yet the design as a garden and the use of the flower as the main motif of this design were always present in them.

The overall layout of these rugs followed a design in which the field is not symmetrical but with a top and a bottom end. The top end points to the direction of prayer. The field is always enclosed in several borders.

The designs can vary. Some are architectural, with an arch, often flanked by colonettes, indicating the prayer direction. Others can have naturalistic or abstracted trees of life as a central motif in the field, the direction of the drawing being the direction of prayer. Yet others can indicate this direction by a play in the form of the spandrels.

In all cases flowers are always the omnipresent motif. They are rendered in different types and they form the basic and secondary elements of the design of the field of the carpet. Flowers also are the main design element of borders and sub divisionary bands. Whatever their aspect, prayer rugs, like all carpets, are conceived as gardens.

Garden to Carpet

Carpets were woven as gardens, different forms of gardens: some are fields with rows of tulips (Mir i bothe), the rows being regular or staggered, the herati pattern being a derivative of this. Some are conceived as gardens with a central pond and with vine trellises all around, while others are compartmented, with each compartment containing a different variety of flower or tree. Compartments can be also placed diagonally, resulting in the quincunx formation so common in orchard planting.

Once in a while we do get designs with highly imaginative elements, and with fantastic shapes and forms. We do also get carpets of such high abstraction that we are left with simplifed patterns and clean fields of color. Whatever the approach, the design is always and only a garden.
Selseleh: Artistic Lineages in Persian Painting

Layla Diba
Presented in English
19 March 2012

Gazing recently at an installation of modern Iranian paintings, I seemed to recognize a certain kinship between them, one not purely formal or thematic, but a deeper, almost familial bond. These visual links seemed to take me back through a portal into the past and I glimpsed, as in a dream, generations upon generations of Persian masters, each a link in a golden chain to the present day.

Selseleh, whose primary meaning is chain, has been used to define a political dynasty, a chain of authorities, and spiritual and family lineages of poets and calligraphers. It is a term also familiar from biographical and hagiographical literature and classical Persian poetry. The term has rarely been applied to the study of Persian painting.

The idea of links, bonds, and chains as well as familial bonds across space and time, associated with the term Selseleh, seemed to me to parallel and illuminate the features of continuity, perfectionism, and consistency that I had associated with the continued florescence and creativity of Persian art over the centuries. My investigations seemingly effortlessly led to three families of painters. Over the span of five hundred years of Persian history, each family in their own way had played a critical role in introducing new developments to Persian painting.

The Selseleh of Sultan Muhammad and the Rise of 16th Century Lacquer painting

Sultan Muhammad, according to the early 17th century author and calligrapher Qazi Ahmad ibn Mir Munshi al-Husayni (ca. 1606), was born in Tabriz and served his apprenticeship as a painter there. According to the Qazi, the second Safavid ruler, Shah Tahmasp, studied painting with Sultan Muhammad, who had succeeded Kamal al-din Bihzad, the leading artist of the Timurid era, as the director of the royal library.

Sultan Muhammad’s name is frequently cited with that of Bihzad, as the two paragons of their age. Sultan Muhammad is known to have had a son, the painter Mirza Ali, and a grandson, the calligrapher, illuminator and painter, Zayn al-Abedin. According to the Qazi, Mirza Ali grew up in the royal atelier and learned his craft under his father’s supervision. He was one of the most skilled painters of his time and contributed superb paintings to the aforementioned Shahnameh and the 1539 royal Khamseh. Zayn al-Abedin, who was praised both for his skill and his character, secured a lifetime post in the royal ateliers under three Safavid rulers and worked on a number of major manuscript commissions. Thus, we can see Sultan Muhammad’s influence in royal circles stretching across two generations of artists and five reigns, suggesting a kind of artistic dynasty.

Further information on Sultan Muhammad and his family is gleaned from the Ottoman civil servant and historian Mustafa Ali. Mustafa Ali writing in 1585-86, claims that Sultan Muhammad had another son by the name of Muhammad Beg who was also a painter and excelled in the art of lacquer binding (jild-I rauqani) and in the composition of group scenes (majalis). Another source mentions Sultan Muhammad Rauqani as the father of the painter Mehdi Beg.

It has recently been argued that the later 16th century painter signing himself Muhammad Ali may be identified with Mustafa Ali’s Muhammad Beg, and a considerable corpus of works of the later 16th century, including a pictorial lacquer binding, has been assigned to him. However, even if this theory proves correct, Muhammad Beg’s early works remains to be identified. It is here we can turn to the medium of lacquer painting to find new evidence.

In the 16th century, due to the Safavid court taste for pictorial designs, stamped leather bookbindings began to be superseded by painted lacquer bindings executed by Safavid master painters such as Sultan Muhammad. Three surviving Safavid manuscripts with lacquered bindings and set of lacquer painted playing cards produced in the first quarter of the 16th century provide evidence of Sultan Muhammad and his son Muhammad Beg’s activities.

A manuscript of the Divan of Hafiz (Harvard Art Museums) plays a key role in the understanding of early Safavid painting. It was produced for Sam Mirza, a brother of Shah Tahmasp, in the late 1520s; sometime before his death in 1533. The Divan features five exquisite paintings, two of which are signed by Sultan Muhammad and one by Shaykh Zadeh. The text itself is unsigned and attributed to Sultan Muhammad Nur. The pictorial binding has been accepted as of the period and in the style of the illustrations and has been attributed to Sultan Muhammad himself.

To this corpus of lacquer works assigned to Sultan Muhammad or his artistic lineage, may be added an exquisite animal-style binding of a manuscript of the poet Arifi’s Divan (Ball and Polo Stick) (Saltykov-Shchedrin Library, no. 441) copied in Tabriz in 1524 by Shah Tahmasp himself for his tutor Qazi Jahan.

The art of lacquer binding would flourish during the late 16th century and became a major medium of expression for the second generation of 16th century Safavid masters such as Sayyidi Ali and possibly Muhammad. Sultan Muhammad and his lineage played a critical role in its adoption and early evolution, thus opening a rich new field for the talents of Persian painters, which continued to flourish in different formats for hundreds of years.

Muhammad Zaman, his Artistic Lineage and the Emergence of Perso-European Painting

The biography and history of Muhammad Zaman and his lineage have intrigued and bedeviled scholars for generations. Active as painters and calligraphers in Isfahan ca. 1650-1722, they played a major role in...
the introduction of a novel style of Perso-European painting, *farangi sazi* and ensured its continued popularity in the 18th century.

The capital of Isfahan became the symbol of the cosmopolitanism and wealth of Safavid Persia. Indeed, it was dubbed from this time onward, *nisf-i jahan*, “half of the world”. The mode of painting which emerged from this period of cultural exchanges, *farangi sazi*, incorporated Renaissance painting techniques of perspective, chiaroscuro, and modeling into the stylized and relatively abstract mode of manuscript illustration.

Muhammad Zaman, arguably the most prolific painter of his school, has proven to be one of the most controversial figures in the history of Persian painting, much like Riza Abbasi. This is so in part, because he is the only Persian artist to be discussed in a contemporary Western source, Nicolau Manucci’s *Giardino del Monio* by Tommaso Tomai published in 1582 (Bibliothèque Nationale, Ms. No. p. 326) begins with a preface by the translator Muhammad Zaman, Farangi Khwan. He notes that he was used to reading books in Persian and studying this language and that he planned to pass the time on his journey to India from the capital of Isfahan, by translating Italian works in his possession.

We may speculate that Manucci’s Zaman and the later painter in Isfahan were one and the same and that he may possibly have tried his hand at copying some of the book’s images during his travels and subsequent stay in India. This theory is corroborated by a little-known work of Zaman’s with intriguing inscriptions from a 17th century album of Mughal and Persian paintings (in the Metropolitan Museum of Art). The ink drawing of a copper plate press is inscribed “from the book of machines...like kh in the month of Rabii al-’Awal of the year 1094 A.H. (equivalent to 1683-84) the humblest Zaman.” The letters illustrating the parts of the press are carefully copied. The book of machines he referred to is Vittorio Zonca’s *Nove OPERE di Macchine ed edifice per Varie & Secure Operazione le loro Figure* (Padua, 1607, 1640, 1656) likely one of the Italian books owned by Zaman. Further evidence of Muhammad Zaman’s talent as a translator-cum-illustrator of Italian texts is provided by newly discovered unsigned watercolor illustrations from a technical treatise in Tehran, executed in Zaman’s style.

Signed works from the early 1670s onwards document Muhammad Zaman’s career as a painter on his return to Isfahan. He found employment at the court, not as a suspect theologian but as the leading exponent of the European style and as a translator and copyist of European illustrated books. His brother Muhammad Ibrahim, a court calligrapher and painter may have helped procure royal patronage for Zaman. Zaman’s son Muhammad Ali, also a gifted painter would be employed at the court in the last decades of the 17th and early 18th centuries.

By a curious twist of fate, Zaman was invited in 1675/76 to refurbish the 1538 Khamseh manuscript illustrated by Mirza Ali. A detached painting signed by Zaman was also probably produced for this project, *Majnun Visited by his Father*. The painting displays the new style to perfection. The illustration was taken from a composition Zaman had devised for a superb penbox dated two years earlier. It is adapted to the vertical format of a manuscript illustration and the figures in reverse indicate they were pounced from the penbox.

Therefore, Zaman may have begun his career as a court artist with exquisite lacquer works presenting to perfection the new realism in landscape, figure painting and floral design. It was probably his talent in this medium which secured him royal patronage.

The works of the 1680s and 90s ascribed to Zaman, display a considerable falling off of quality as commissions for illustrating at least three manuscripts were given to Zaman. For these works he was undoubtedly assisted by his son and perhaps his brother and other artists. It has been argued that Zaman’s brother was the better painter. I find that assertion doubtful: the superb pen box dated 1202 A.H/1691 A.D signed Muhammad Ibrahim ibn Haji Yusuf Qumi attests primarily to his skills as a designer, calligrapher, and paper cutter and his signed works are few. Furthermore, a 17th century biographical source lists him as a calligrapher.

Muhammad Zaman’s son, on the other hand, has left a small corpus of figural paintings and lacquer works which display his debt to his father, as well as his considerable skills as a painter in the Perso-European mode. His compositions range from sensuous erotic works with mystical allusions to complex and expressive historical scenes. One of his later signed works, a watercolor depicting the New Year’s ceremony of Shah Sultan Husayn dated 1133/1721 (British Library) captures the atmosphere of gloom and depression that must have pervaded Isfahan as it was approaching its bloody end. The last ruler, his face in shadow, magnificently clothed in the remnants of Safavid wealth, distributes bags of gold coins to ghostly courtiers.

The Ghaffari Family and the Perso-European Style in the 19th Century

The continued influence of this style can be seen in a painting of Shah Abbas II and his court. Originally assigned to Muhammad Zaman, it is here attributed to Abul Hasan Mustawfi Ghaffari, one of the early members of the last artistic dynasty to be discussed, Abul Hasan the First, as he came to be known. The Ghaffaris were a distinguished family of jurors and state officials who combined public service with a love of the arts. The family’s roots were said to go back to the early days of Islam, but we pick up the story in 18th century Shiraz, where Abul Hasan apprenticed as a painter in his youth. But according to his own introduction to the *Gulshan-i Murad*, a history of the reign of Karim Khan I Zand which he authored, a family friend actively discouraged him from pursuing such a lowly career. Dutifully, Abul Hasan became Karim Khan’s court scribe and the chronicler of his reign. Yet he continued to paint, as evidenced by the surviving portraits of his family, of historical figures
and rulers, and compositions of court receptions dated between 1781 and 1794.

Abul Hasan worked within the idiom of late Safavid painting, yet he developed a signature style reflecting its evolution in the 18th century to a broader more expressive mode. Distinctive features are lively compositions, broad shouldered figures, stiff turbans and placid-faced youths. Most compelling for our attribution is his habit of using inscriptions in thulth script in his paintings either as borders to carpets or in architectural panels.

The Ghaffari family continued to thrive in the 19th century under the Qajars. During Nasir al-Din Shah's long reign from 1848 until his assassination in 1866, his son Yahya, later known as Abul Hasan the Third, had apprenticed under his father, probably on the 1001 Nights project, as can be deduced from a Masnavi of Rumi he illustrated with 50 paintings, clearly influenced by the style of the 1001 Nights. Nasir al-Din Shah deeply regretted the loss of his most gifted court painter and in homage to him awarded his son the title Abul Hasan the Third, which he did not really merit.

During this generation, the number of Ghaffari family members active as painters grew even further to include the most illustrious of all, Muhammad Ghaffari Kamal al-Mulk, the rightful heir to the Ghaffari tradition. Muhammad Ghaffari cherished a copy of his ancestor's history of the reign of Karim Khan and discussed his ancestor and enumerated his paintings with learned friends. Muhammad Ghaffari executed portraits of the ruler, scenes of the court and palace and landscape views that surpassed his contemporaries in their almost photographic realism, attention to detail and color sense.

The painting of *Nasir al Din Shah in the Diamond Hall* is considered by many as his masterpiece and is one of the landmarks of modern Persian painting, a last link in this long golden chain of art and history.

This essay has presented the story of later Persian painting through the history of its creative families—genealogical approach if you will. This approach expands our field of investigation beyond questions of individual authorship and patronage. By focusing on three artistic dynasties, this essay has shed new light on the primary mechanism which ensured the continuity and innovation of Persian painting, laying the foundations for the birth of modern painting in Iran, that same modern painting that continues to inspire and move us today.
The topic of my lecture is about sculpture in Islamic Iran. Despite numerous books and articles on pre-Islamic sculpture of Iran, no significant study has been undertaken on the sculpture in Islamic Iran. Due to prohibition of sculpture, to most people, there is no sculpture in Islam. This paper is aimed to discuss the attempts of the artists whom by their contribution kept this art alive.

In the early literature of Iran only one sculptor is mentioned. This mythical figure’s name is Farhad-e Kuhkan, or Farhad the Mountain Carver, and his legendary story is told in the Khamsah of the late 12th-early 13th-century by Persian poet Nizami. Although the love story of Farhad, which was set during the pre-Islamic Sasanian period (224-651 CE) has overshadowed his occupation and he is seldom recognized as a sculptor, the brief mentions by some early historians leave no doubt that Farhad was the last sculptor of Iran, before Islam.

Among the historians who mention the name of Farhad is the mid-10th-century Arab geographer Abu Dalf Mas’ar ibn Muhalhal. Several paragraphs about sculpture in his book Al-Risalah al-Thaniyah (the second treatise) that mention Farhad are noteworthy. While traveling though Kermanshah before 940 CE, he describes the statue of Khosrow Parviz—the Sasanian king on his horse—and a few of the reliefs in a man-made grotto. Then he writes, “It is said that these were made by the order of Khosrow Parviz by Farhad-e hakim” (Farhad the sage).

Two centuries later, Nizami (c. 1141-1203 or 1217), while creating the love story of Farhad and Shirin, described Farhad’s artworks in more detail and called him the great sculptor of Khosrow’s court. Nizami’s poems inspired later painters to depict Farhad’s artworks and use them as background scenes in their paintings. These two details from two 15th-century paintings show two of the grotto’s sculptures and reliefs. A comparison between the figure of the horse and the horseman holding a spear in the painting and its similarities to the sculpture of the grotto is noteworthy. The same is true of the three figures in the painting and the relief. Considering the more than half a millennium gap between the two artworks, also keeping in mind that the painters did these scenes out of their imaginations, their similarities are striking.

The love of Farhad for Shirin not only triggered one of the most dramatic love stories of all time but also evoked the end of golden era of Iranian sculpting. In order to understand the perspective of my lecture, a brief summary of the story of Farhad would be useful.

Farhad the Mountain Carver was an artist in the service of one of the most powerful Sasanian kings, Khosrow Parviz, (r. 590-628 CE). Khosrow’s wealth, military conquests, and wives are proverbial among Persians. King Khosrow’s beloved Shirin possessed not only great beauty but also a lively intelligence. At first sight, Farhad fell desperately in love with her. Tom between his own adoration of Shirin and his admiration for Farhad’s artistic achievements, the king set an impossible subject. If Farhad succeeded, the king promised him Shirin. Farhad was challenged to carve a passage through Mount Bisotun; if he failed, he would have to surrender Shirin forever. Inspired by the challenge, Farhad worked day and night with such passionate energy that King Khosrow was alarmed by his progress. Fearing defeat, he sent a messenger to Farhad, falsely informing him of Shirin’s death. Upon hearing the news, distressed and heartbroken, Farhad fell from the mountain and died.

The death of Farhad not only was the end of a dramatic love story, also the end of sculpting in Iran, as some years later the Muslims conquered Iran, Iranians converted to Islam and accepted all its rules and regulations including the prohibition of sculpting. Yet sculpture did not totally die out and, as we will soon see, it survived and flourished in other ways.

During the first three centuries of Islam in Iran, from the 7th to 9th century, sculptures were reduced to a small scale and were incorporated into utilitarian objects. Some of the sormehdans (kohl containers), although they are small, but they still possess the sculptural qualities. Some other objects—including this throne leg made in the late 7th to early 8th century (and now in The Metropolitan Museum of Art) followed the Sasanian style, while other utilitarian objects like...
The distance from the Muslim caliphs, more than a thousand miles away from their capitals in Syria and Jazira, gave courage to craftsmen in eastern Iran to incorporate human and animal forms into utilitarian objects. These include some of the pots with human shapes made in southeastern Iran during this period, between 8 to 10th centuries. Human figures were also made in bronze and used on handles for vessels.

All the above-mentioned examples were small and were functional in some way. Pure and non-functional sculptures had to wait longer, but not too long.

A few life-size stucco figures unearthed in northeastern Iran well represent the development of the sculpting in the 12th and 13th centuries. Two of these stuccos are in The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and one is in the Detroit Institute of Arts. The Khalili Collection in London also possesses one, the position of the stucco of the Khalili’s piece shows a male or female in motion, in oppose to the static position of the previous ones. Besides the full figure in the Khalili Collection, there is also a head that was originally part of a whole figure.

The 10th to 13th centuries can be called the golden era of sculpture in Iran. During this period, northeastern Iran, particularly greater Khorasan, became the center of sculpting activities, to such an extent that sculpting reached its zenith during that period. This early Islamic plaster head, perhaps one of the earliest pieces from northern Khorasan, still bears some aspects of pre-Islamic sculpture.

In this period (10th to 13th century), techniques of bronze casting were further developed. Artists and artisans at that time turned their attention to naturalistic figures, namely animals and birds, and managed to realize their ideas through advanced techniques of bronze casting. One of these, an ewer now in Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, made in shape of cow, calf, and lion with the height of 35 cm is a masterpiece of the period. Important data on this piece including the date 1206 CE and the name of its creator Ali ibn Muhammad ibn Abu’l-Qasim an-naqqash is engraved on the piece. Why the creator of this work calls himself ‘naqqash’ painter and not sculptor remains an unanswered question.

Obviously to make such formidable sculpture, one has to have experience and knowledge of sculpting. An ordinary painter could not make such piece. In my opinion in those days a sculpture guild did not exist, or if it did, it was not openly announced and sculptors preferred to be recognized as painters.

Birds were also favored by artists. An eagle and a rooster, also in the Hermitage Museum, are also great examples of the period. The powerful forms of these sculptures are rooted in the pre-Islamic art of Iran, while the surface is delicately decorated with Islamic motifs. The remarkable incorporation of two cultures in is overwhelming.

The lion was especially favored by artists. Not only was this form used on handles for vessels but it was often used for incense burners. The masterpiece of this group, without any doubt, is that in the Metropolitan Museum, this large bronze piece—85 centimeters high, slightly smaller than an actual Persian lion, which was not as big as the African lion, and has been extinct in Iran since the mid 20th century. This late 12th-century piece represents the peak of early Islamic sculpting. The casting, the size, and the finishing of this work are all in such harmony that anything better could not be imagined. All the information including the artist Ja’far ibn Muhammad ibn Arslan, and Amir Saif al-Dunya ibn al-Muwardi the person who commissioned the work and the date 577 Hejri / 1181-82 AD are engraved on the piece.

During the golden period of sculpture in the 10th to 13th century, potters also played an important role. Ceramic sculptures in different techniques—including by mold or directly with clay slabs—were made and glazed in various ways. Although many of these pieces are small, occasionally some larger pieces are found. The Blue Eagle and the Bird with Human head (both at the Metropolitan Museum) are among the best examples.

The Mongol invasion in the 14th century almost completely destroyed the infrastructure of the country, and most crafts, including sculpting, died out. Although some of the Ilkhanids—the successors of Genghis Khan—became great art patrons, they gave most of their attention to architecture. Apart from a few ceramic sculptures in animal and human shapes, not much sculpture was produced during this period. Among these ceramics, the bust of Tughrul, a late 13th–early 14th century ceramic chess piece made in Kashan is worthy of mentioning. Although the piece is 41 cm high, it is said that it was a chess piece. If it was, then again the creators of sculptures gave a function to their works, especially if it was human figure to avoid clerics’ criticism. Also another mask in shape of a man’s face made in steel, from this period is worthy of mention. Both the ceramic and the steel mask are from the Khalili collection.

With the ascendance of the Safavid to power in the early 16th century, once more sculpting was revitalized, but this time in different ways. The Safavids were Shi’ites and their main objective was to promote Shi’ism. Politics, of course, played a great role in their goal, to such an extent that Shi’ism became a shield with which to confront their Sunni western and northern neighbors, namely, the Ottomans and the Uzbeks.

One of the icons that the Safavids promoted most was lion. To them the lion was the symbol of ‘Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad and the first Shi’ite Imam. One of the title of Ali, Asadolla meaning Lion of God, plus his bravery and manliness, was good enough reason to resemble ‘Ali the lion’. Therefore the lion was represented on the banners of the mosques and Hussainiaies (temporary mosques for the holy month of Muharam).

In cemeteries and shrines, the tombstones of martyrs and brave men were carved in the shape of a lion. Some of the most beautiful of these stone lions are still in Isfahan. Though most these lions date back to the 17th century, one of them might be even older. A beautiful stone lion, is in the Shrine of Harun Velayat, and the lion sculpture may date to early 16th century. On the entrance of the shrine an inscription on a ceramic tile states that the construction of the shrine is attributed to the first Safavid shah, Shah Isma’il (r. 1501-1524). The name of the shrine’s architect, Hassan Banna, is inscribed on another ceramic tile panel. Possibly this stone lion was made in honor of that architect, since an architect’s compass is carved on the lion’s left shoulder. Jean-Baptiste Chardin, who visited Isfahan in the seventeenth century tells the story of this architect, who heroically saved Shah Isma’il’s wife on a stormy day.

The stone lions of the Safavid capital, Isfahan, soon attracted the attention of the villagers and tribal
people. Numerous stone lions in the tribal cemeteries of western Iran can still be seen. Among the most outstanding are those of the Bakhtiar.

Stone lions were not only installed on tombs. The Safavids and later rulers used this form for column bases in their palaces. One of the most powerful of these stone lions supports columns under the overhanging roof of the Palace of Chehel Sotun (forty columns) in Isfahan.

Another 17th-century stone lion, which was once in the Khalkat Palace, is now in the garden of the Chehel Sotun Palace. A water spout is carved alternatively with a lion and the figure of a young girl wearing only a short skirt, a provocative scene for those days.

The Afghan invasion in 1722 and the subsequent fall of the Safavids put a stop to all art production, including sculpture. The country did not recover during the short domination of the Afghans, and not even after their defeat by Nadir Shah (r. 1736-1747). During the reigns of Nader Shah and his successors, although the country was unified, but little attention was paid to the arts. This task was passed on to the next dynasty, the Zand period dating from 1750-1794.

Karim Khan Zand the founder of Zand dynasty (r. 1750-1779) moved his capital to Shiraz and invited Shah, wanting to be surrounded by beautiful women and his love for women was not diminished even then.

Another contribution of Fath‘ Ali Shah in Iranian history cannot deny his love of the arts. The number of painters and sculptors he gathered at his court and the works he commissioned to them are well beyond the scope of this paper.

During his crown prince-ship in Shiraz, Fath‘ ali Shah must have visited Persepolis and other ancient sites. In those days, the history of Iran was mixed with legends and Persepolis was thought to be the palace of Solomon.

Upon becoming shah, the ambitious young Shah ordered the Isfahani sculptors to carve a throne out of marble to match the legendary throne of Solomon, which was carried on the shoulders of the angels and demons. Shah was aware of his physical beauty and said that he was grateful to God for having granted it to him. He commissioned more portraits of himself than did any other Iranian king. Just before he died, he ordered a full-length figure of himself to be carved on his marble tombstone. Even after his death, Fath‘ Ali Shah wanted to be surrounded by beautiful women and his love for women was not diminished even then.

The name of the designer Abdulla and the sculptor Muhammad- Ali Isfahani both appear at the bottom of the tomb stone. Carving a large scale human figure on tomb- stone and placing it in one of the holiest shrines of Iran “Qom” in those days, called for a lot of nerves and Fath‘ Ali Shah had it.

This large tomb sculpture was a great innovation for his time, and one that was followed by his sons and successors Muhammad Shah and some of his sons and grand- sons including Shoja‘al Saltaneh, Qahreman Mirza, and Mirza Muhammad Khan.

The last figurative tombstone of a ruler in Iran is the that of Naser al-Din Shah (r.1848-1896).

Another contribution of Fath ‘Ali Shah in Iranian sculpture was the revival of relief carving on mountain sides. Such sculpting has a long history in Iran and goes back to second millennium BCE. At the beginning of this talk we saw the last pre-Islamic rock sculpture, which was attributed to Khosrow-Parviz.

Revival of this art by Fath ‘Ali Shah will be better explained in my forthcoming book Sculpture in Islamic Iran. But a few words about Fath ‘Ali Shah’s interest in the history of Iran and his visits to its ancient sites should be mentioned here. While he was crown prince in Fars, he visited the pre-Islamic sites, including those at Persepolis, Bishapur, and Kermanshah. Upon ascending the throne of Iran, he begin realizing his dreams one after another. Like great Ilamites, Achamenians and Sasanian kings he wanted to become eternal on the crest of the mountains.

Soon after he moved to Tehran, the capital of the empire, he began realizing the second series of his dreams. The geographical situation of Tehran with high mountains on the north and south provided perfect sites for executing his monumental rock reliefs. His first relief was a scene showing him on a horseback, hunting a lion on the mountains of Ray, south of Tehran. He wanted this relief to be carved on top of similar subject — showing a shah hunting a lion — executed a millennium earlier, during the Sasanian period.

Fath ‘Ali Shah’s relief was destroyed in the nineteen-fifties and its fragments were used for a cement factory.

The second of Fath ‘Ali Shah’s rock reliefs is not far from his lion hunting scene in the lower part of a nearby mountain, measuring 11 by 4 meters. This relief shows Fath ‘Ali Shah and his sons and courtiers in an official scene. That scene must have been based on one of Fath ‘Ali Shah’s many official portraits. On the lower left corner of the relief the name of Abdull- the court painter of Fath‘ Ali Shah- the same man whose name’s was on Fath‘Ali Shah’s tomb stone appears, but no mention of the sculptor.

The masterpieces of Fath ‘Ali Shah’s rock reliefs, however, is in Tangh-e Washi in a remote area in the mountains of Firuzkuh about 90 kilometers northeast of Tehran. Almost unreachable, this work is carved on the crest of a canyon. In order to reach it, you have to walk in the river below it. Many questions, including why Fath ‘Ali Shah choose this difficult site, remain unanswered. The cold temperature of the site, even in the middle of summer, and the limited sunlight add to the other challenges mentioned above.

The relief measuring 9 by 9 meters shows a hunting scene of Fath ‘Ali Shah, his sons, courtiers, and hunters with their names carved next to them. This work is very reminiscent of one of the Sasanian rock reliefs at Taq-e Bostan, near the city of Kermanshah in western Iran. This one shows the figure of Khosrow on horseback, which we saw at the beginning of this lecture. It is possible that Fath ‘Ali Shah asked his artists to create a relief similar to that of Khosrow Parviz.

Carved on the side of the relief are the names of all the creators of this masterpiece, including the the Mohandes or engineer, the calligrapher, and the sculptor (Ustad Qasim), as well as the date (1233 AH, or 1817 AD). Although Ustad Qasim has been called nader al zaman (rarity of his time) and in one of the poems he is called Farhad-e zaman (Farhad of our time), his name appears nowhere else and remains unknown to everyone.

Fath ‘Ali Shah’s rock carving inspired one more version, by his grandson Naser al-Din Shah ruled about half century from 1848-1896. Naser al- Din Shah’s rock relief is also in a remote area, 92 kilometers north of Tehran and it measures 9 by 6 meters. There the shah is on his horse in the midst of his courtiers and servants, all on foot. The style of this work is not the same as what we have seen previously, however. If we consider the style of the
At the end of the 19th century, sculpture reached the peak of its popularity in Iran. In those days anyone built a decent house, sculpture was a part of it. Before the days of indoor plumbing, every house had a pool, and on most pools the water spouts were in the shape of human heads or animals. At the main entrance door of some aristocrat homes, the figure of a guardian was installed. This trend even found its way to some of the holy shrines. The reliefs before the entrance gate of the Shrine of Abdolaziz in Ray (south of Tehran) show the occupation of some of the people working for the shrine. The first one is "the shoe keeper" the second one is the 'mutevalli' or the custodian, the third one is a hajjar or the tombstone maker and the last one is a lock seller. You would be interested to know that these locks were not for home security, but for the pilgrims. The pilgrims who had unsolved problems or wanted their wishes to come through, bought one of these locks and put it on the grilles of the shrine.

What I showed you, although it is not all that was made, but it is not too far off either. If you multiply the number of sculptures I showed you, by two or three times, it will be close to a right figure. Now if you divide this number to 14 hundred years, then you will realize the modest production of the sculpture during the Islamic era.

Another point to mention is the inconsistency of the Islamic sculpture of Iran. About 90% of the works I showed you were made in two golden periods, the first period was from 10 to 13 century and the second period from 17 to 19th century.

Any time the country was ruled by an art admirer Sultan or Shah, and if this sultan or shah was ambitious and wanted to have a legendary court or palace, similar to those of the great Pre-Islamic kings of Iran, he gathered artists of all fields and asked them to incorporate human and animal figures in the fringes and column bases of their architecture, or make them into useful objects.

It was through the efforts of these people that the art of three dimensionality survived and its beauty and splendour was passed on to us.

In today's Iran hundreds if not thousands of youngsters are choosing sculpting as their main profession and this number is on a constant rise.

Iranian artist Parviz Tanavoli is an internationally recognised sculptor and author. His work has been exhibited in galleries, museums and public spaces around the world, with solo exhibition in London's Austun/Desmond Gallery (2011). Mr. Tanavoli has authored dozens of publications, dating back over 30 years on subjects ranging from Iranian tribal textiles to locks.

In many respects, some centuries ago, the Eastern and the Western worlds were a united cultural whole. An example of this coherence can be demonstrated through the penetration of Islamic dream sciences into the Latin and Romance culture. With this aim, I will look especially at Dante's (d. 1321) Divine Comedy, to see how the Italian author assimilates and integrates Islamic dream sciences into his epic poem at the beginning of fourteenth century.

First of all, we have to consider that today the term cultural and social "evolution" is used in the context of a steady progression toward scientific and technological research, but it also means a sense of forgetfulness of those ages in which people and different societies used to live more harmoniously than now, with a stronger sense of integration and interconnection between different cultural traditions.

In 1919, the Spanish professor Miguel Asín Palacios suggested that translated Islamic texts available to Dante influenced many of the ideas and motifs present in the Divine Comedy, which he discusses in his book La Escatologia musulmana en la Divina Comedia. Asín Palacios particularly compares Islamic religious literature surrounding the night journey of Muhammad with Dante's story describing his spiritual journey. He also conjectures how Dante could have known direct sources of translated Muslim literature. In his conclusion Asín Palacios stated that the Divine Comedy was strongly inspired by Islamic literature.

Here I would like to consider two critical issues. The first issue consists of examining how the Islamic dream sciences are present in medieval Latin culture; the second one will be an attempt to

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**Crossing Boundaries: Islamic Dream Sciences, Dante and Romance Literature**

Dante Alighieri, along with other poets, was among those who were interested in the science of dream coming from Islamic tradition. Dante is more generally - and maybe stereotypically I think - believed to be one who derides Muslims and Islamic culture, because of the infamous episode in the Inferno (XXVIII), where the poet situates the soul of the Prophet Muhammad. In fact, medieval Christian perceptions of the Prophet, who created the religion of Islam, considered him guilty of religious schism. We however have to consider that Dante placed three Catholic Popes in the Inferno (XIX), as he deeply criticized how his own religion was corrupted. Therefore, Dante most likely criticized specific aspects of both cultures. However, he certainly praised the knowledge and refinement of Arabic culture, taking into consideration some episodes of the Purgatory in which Dante displays great knowledge of and a deepest respect for the ancient divinatory sciences that were born and used in Islam.
assess Dante Alighieri’s Divine Comedy through a cross-cultural lens to uncover the traditions coming from the Islamic world that are so deeply inserted into Dante’s narrative.

Asín Palacios’ book inspired a wide array of energetic reactions, both positive and negative; however a negative response to his study persisted in public opinion long after it was published. But in 1949, a mere five years later Asín Palacios’ death, two scholars, the Spaniard José Muñoz Sendino and the Italian Enrico Cerulli, uncovered the 11th century Kitab al-Mi’raj, the The Book of Muhammad’s Ladder, which describes Muhammad’s night journey. This work had been translated into Castilian (now lost), Latin (Liber scalae machometi) and Old French (Le livre de l’eschiele Mahomet) by scribes of King Alfonso the X el Sabio. It appears that Dante’s mentor Brunetto Latini stayed at the court of the Spanish king in 1260, providing a plausible means by which a translated version of the Kitab al-Mi’raj could have travelled to the Italian peninsula and to Dante’s milieu. Although this “missing link” was not available to Asín Palacios, he had based his work on several similar accounts of Muhammad’s Book of Muhammad’s Ladder then circulating among the literary or pious Muslims of Al-Andalus.

In 1993, an eminent Dante scholar, Maria Corti, put forward the need of re-examining the connections highlighted by Asín-Palacios. More recently, a new generation of scholars is focusing once again on the consequences of this argument.

Scholars have agreed essentially on one point, which is the concept of the ascet of the individual soul in the afterlife functions as grand allegory for the gradual purification of humanity. Another commonality shared by Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, is the experience of revelation through a spiritual vision, and that visions received in dreams play a very important role in the process of revelation itself.

So dreams are central to the understanding of the connections between East and West. Why is it so?

Perhaps because every human being dreams. Every society tries to analyse the irrational process of dreaming. Generally, the dreamer retains only strange sensations: a vague recollection of combined real and fantasy elements.

In the last century psychoanalysis focused on oneric symbols as a revelation of the inner and private unconscious. Through dreams, and particularly through analysis and comprehension of the structure of dreams, it is possible to provide a therapeutic interpretation of the dreamer.

Throughout Ancient Greece and the Arabic and Latin Middle Ages the unconscious was understood through external and religious elements. The ancient science of dreams was a process of analysis that sought to define a natural and divine component. It was believed that dreams were linked to sensory reality, and that the dreamer, in sleep, could indeed have contact with the divine.

Dreams and visions generally characterize every revelation in literature, but they also distinguish the sacred texts of the religions of the Mediterranean, as mentioned above, appearing liberally in the holy Bible and in the holy Qur’an. Both texts are based on the revelation of the divine message, giving to humanity the possibility of interpreting this message. The one who will be capable of it will be considered the elect, the prophet who will translate through recording his mystical experience.

In the second century CE, Artemidorus Daldianus wrote the most important dream-book of antiquity. It is an encyclopedic dictionary of oneric symbols. This book is a guide for the dreamer, and it inaugurates the important traditions of both oneric criticism (the science of interpreting dreams) and oneiromancy (divination by means of dream analysis) during the Middle Ages. Artemidorus’ work was translated by Hunayn Ibn Ishāq during the 9th century, and then integrated in pseudo Achrmet Ibn Sîrîn’s text, which was widely diffused in al-Dînawarî’s text in the 10th century.

Leo Tuscus, an Italian from Pisa, near Florence, translated into Latin these dream-books in 1176 in Constantinople, importing in the Latin world Artemidorus’ new methods of dream interpretation, which Dante, as we shall see, used in his poetic works. Thanks to the availability of Leo Tuscus’ translations, the Latin process of dream interpretation changed dramatically. Islamic dream sciences having contributed the directive to relate the dream to the external circumstances of the dreamer, such as temporal and astrological circumstances through which the dream was produced. Therefore, dream interpretation was more strictly linked to sciences like astronomy, alchemy and geomancy, in order to interpret the process related to the external conditions of the dreamer.

Oneiromancy, the popular tradition of dream sciences, produced dream manuals that provided a useful tool for dream interpretation for the use of common people. During the Middle Ages, the most important dream manual was the Somniale Danielis. It has its origins in early fourth-century CE Greek manuscripts, and thrived in the Middle Ages mainly in Arabic, Latin, and the European vernaculars, and with multiple traditions of dream sciences mixed together.

The Somniale Danielis consists of a list of dream symbols arranged in alphabetical order, and interpreted as portending something good or evil for the dreamer. Each “key word” in an entry was followed by a concise interpretation, which was easily accessed and consulted. The structural form of the Somniale Danielis, revealed in multiple surviving manuscripts, tend to change according to the oneric imaginary of the geographical area to which they belong; their structure, however, remains the same.

This dream-book summarized the Greek, the Arabic, and the Latin traditions of dream interpretation in their simplest form. It was a widely circulated dream manual in the late Middle Ages. In fact it was translated into many languages during the Middle Ages, including: Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Hebrew, Armenian, Aramaic, Syrian, Egyptian, English, French, German, and Italian.

The Somniale Danielis guided the interpretation of dreams and also served as an important tool in the understanding of dreams incorporated into medieval literary texts and in the identification and description of traditional dream topics. The entries of the dream-book present a framework within which medieval vision poetry develops its network of images and motifs.

Italian secular literature of the thirteenth century, of which Dante is the most important representative,
used dreams as a narrative expedient because it was an element that could be perceived and understood easily and widely.

The presence of the Somniale in literary miscellany manuscripts, I have identified and transcribed eight unrecognized traditions of the Somniale Daniels bound together with icons of early Islamic literature in their Latin and Italian vernacular versions. Brunetto Latini, Dante, Guido Cavalcanti, Cecco D'Ascoli, Antonio Pucci, Petrarch, Boccaccio and others are particularly well represented in these manuscripts, and it is not a mere coincidence. The reason for the integration of the popular-scientific genre of the Somniale Daniels in these authors' works can be explained by the fact that they were more attentive to the oneirocritic tradition from Artemidorous Dalaius (2nd century CE) and to the mythical theories of the thirteenth century, with its implementation of Islamic theories of dream interpretation through Leo Tuscus' translations, which are so critical to the understanding of the circulation of Islamic traditions throughout the Latin world.

In the Divine Comedy, as we shall see, Dante perfectly integrated Islamic dream sciences. This is particularly evident in the narrative moments in which the poet dreams, during his voyage into the afterlife. Indeed, the Comedy features three dream sequences in which all are situated in the Purgatory, the intermediary realm before the ascent to Paradise. In Dante's text, dreams are recurrent and demonstrate a great knowledge of contemporary theories of oneirocriticism. The capacity of dreams to predict the future, discussed by oneirocriticism and oneirocriticism in classical and medieval treatises, is translated in the Comedey into the anticipation of key structural elements of the text.

The first dream alludes to the purifying voyage that Dante is about to undertake, while he is assisted by a divine intercessor like the eagle. In the second dream, the Femmina Balba, the stammering woman, symbol of the seduction of mundane things, anticipates the three next circles, where he purges the incontinence of love. In the third and last dream, Leah, a symbol of active life, helps Dante to enter Earthly Paradise.

The immediate significance of the symbols that Dante dreams, is possibly recovered with the aid of the Somniale Daniels. The symbols that appear to Dante in his three dreams - the eagle, the woman and the act of picking flowers as Leah does in the dream - correspond to entries of the Somniale Daniels. According to the Somniale Daniels, dreaming of an eagle flying above one's head confers honor, something that Dante is pursuing in his ascension toward Earthly Paradise. Dreaming of a woman means harm, damage, and what Dante is stepping into when he dreams of the stammering woman. Finally, dreaming of someone who picks flowers means to beware of the enemy, a condition that describes Dante when he finally enters Earthly Paradise.

Now I will essentially focus my attention on the second dream of the Purgatory. Here Dante relies on an important Islamic divinatory science, geomancy, in order to interpret dreams. If the Somniale Daniels is a reference text for oneirocritomy, the prophet Daniel also gives his name to other lesser-known treatises; especially those linked to other divinatory sciences such as geomancy. The Malhamat Dāniyāl was a popular text with astrological and meteorological characteristics of Christian origins with Islamic additions. Thus, Daniel, as the Prophet who was able to interpret dreams, was attributed the invention of oneirocritomy and geomancy.

Geomancy is sciences are thus gathered under one name, that of Daniel, who is able to legitimize them, especially in face of the Catholic censorship. Geomancy - or dream science of the sand - was introduced by the Arabs into the Latin Occident and Byzantine Orient around the twelfth century. It is a divinatory technique that allows the knowledge of the past, the understanding of the present, and the telling of the future. This science is based on simple signs without requiring any specific instrument; for reason, it was used more frequently than astrology. It required only the act of tracing points on the ground or on paper that were related to planets and constellations. Between 1288 and 1295 Islamic geomantic manuals were translated into Latin.

In the thirteenth century, contemporarily to the diffusion of these texts, some instruments and manuals dedicated to divinatory arts were commercialized. In Venice's harbour, which was one of the most important harbours of the eastern Mediterranean, some instruments for geomantic calculation and astrolabes with their manuals of instruction arrived with other oriental goods.

Upon the diffusion of these instruments, the Islamic divinatory arts became easier to practice individually and the use of a professional seer was no longer necessary. Just as the link between the Somniale Daniels and Italian literature is important, so is the link between literature and geomancy in order to interpret dreams.

In that hour when the heat of day, defeated By earth and, sometimes, Saturn, can no longer Warm up the moon-sent cold, when geomancers Can, in the east, see their Fortuna major Rising before the dawn along a path That will be darkened for it only briefly- A stammering woman came to me in dream (Purgatory IX, lines 1-7)

In this passage Dante determines the position of the constellations in the sky, using six geomantic figures: Earth, Saturn, Moon, Fortuna major, Dawn and Path. The integration of these scientific elements in the poem has the precise aim to locate in time the dream that Dante is about to have. The dream occurs just before dawn, in the colder hour of night, right Leo, the constellation of Aquarius is rising at Orient, followed by Arles. This means that, looking at the Florence meridian the date of the dream is 12 April 1301. These are the precise external conditions of the dreamer, which are a typical tool of dream interpretation coming from an Islamic tradition. More evidently, in his first commentary to his father's work, Pietro Alighieri helps the reader to disentangle the meaning of this passage. In order to interpret the second dream in Canto XIX of the Purgatory, he offers more geomantic figures related to the one inserted in the text, an addition that suggests that he had a strongly familiarity with geomancy.

Pietro Alighieri demonstrates the character of opposition that distinguishes Dante's second dream, proposing an additional geomantic figure underlying this aspect. He couples Fortuna major with its opposition figure Fortuna minor:

When geomancers operate the calculus correlating the figures of fortuna major and minor with the constellations in the sky during the sun rise; if you dream a siren, a dangerous woman, as the text says; you are worn by the result. (Pietro Alighieri, Petri Allegreri super Dantis (opus genitoris Comediam Commentarium, 429-430)

The opposition of the two figures seems to reflect and explain the ambiguity of the stammering woman who appears to Dante in his dream, who transforms herself from a monstrous creature into a seductive one, placing Dante in great danger.

According to manuals of geomancy diffused throughout Christendom through their Latin translation, the combination of Fortuna major and Fortuna minor is positively auspicious, indicating that one will overcome an immediate obstacle, and thus allure to the danger that Dante has to face before entering into the earthly Paradise. It seems, therefore, that the opposition of these two figures anticipates the contents of the dream, which is a warning against the seduction of mundane things in order to be able to continue the ascension toward Paradise.

These two interrelated dream sciences are able to explain the dream that Dante is about to have, and the role of Dante's son demonstrates that these sciences were common knowledge at the time in which the Divine Comedy was composed and subsequently commented upon.

To conclude, it is critical to note that when Dante awakens from this second dream, he compares himself to a falcon. This is mostly an Islamic symbol, well-known in the Latin world in the thirteenth century due to Emperor Frederick II, who famously imported the practice of hunting with falcons. This other element of the falcon as I see it, a strong connection with Islamic culture, stated, once again, not on the surface of the text but is inherent to its very matrix, detectable between its lines.

Just like a falcon, who at first looks down, then, answering the falconer's call, bends forward, craving the food that's ready for him there, so I became and so remained. (Purgatory XIX, lines 64-67)
The Power of Art: Views from the Modern Middle East

Venetia Porter
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The British Museum has a growing collection of works by Middle Eastern artists which it has been building since the late 1980s. It consists principally of works on paper and now has over 200 artists from across the Middle East and North Africa represented in it. Middle Eastern artists often maintain clear links with their history, cultural heritage and the politics of their countries today, on a variety of levels whether they are living in their country of origin or in diaspora.

What particularly interests the British Museum, as a museum of history, are the narratives inherent in these works. This article highlights some of the museum’s recent acquisitions. (Middle East and North Africa Modern art, the British Museum).

Focussing on work made during the last decade, a number of themes are addressed in the pieces that the museum has acquired and which are discussed here: conflict and war, gender and identity; links to cultural heritage such as literature, Islamic architecture and talismanic traditions. Turning first to conflict and war, it is hardly surprising that this should be a subject of artistic expression when we consider what has dominated the region during the last decades: the first Gulf war and the invasion of Kuwait (1991), the Iraq war and its aftermath (2003), the attacks of 11th September and their aftermath (2001), the continued and troubled history of Israel and Palestine, the recent ‘Arab Spring’ effecting changes of regime in Tunisia, Yemen and Egypt, and which has inspired the attacks of 11th September and their aftermath (2001), the continued and troubled history of Israel and Palestine, the recent ‘Arab Spring’ effecting changes of regime in Tunisia, Yemen and Egypt, and which has inspired the current and desperate civil war in Syria. The rawness, immediacy and response to the various conflicts can be seen in graffiti, posters, cartoons, video films and installations being produced all over the region in addition to the more traditional arts such as painting and sculpture.

Artists living and breathing the issues and conflicts that affect them can shine a light on a particular event, or capture a moment in time; the most skilled can convey a mood, or give pause for thought. If we consider the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for example, two artists highlighted here Suleiman Mansour and Eman Mohammed offer particular perspectives: in a charcoal and watercolour drawing entitled ‘Khader, his wife Ebtesam and their seven daughters see feeding pigeons in front of his house in Gaza destroyed following the 22 day incursion by Israeli forces into Gaza in 2009’, Mohammed comments: ‘Khader, his wife Ebtesam and their seven daughters live without electricity or mains supplies.’

Eman Mohammed’s photograph also highlights another factor when considering the work of Middle Eastern artists and that is the changing role and nature of photography. For the boundary between reportage and art photography has become increasingly blurred. It is now often the case that a photo-journalist will also be considered an ‘art’ photographer and their work not simply acquired through photo agencies but through galleries. This ‘blurring’ is explored in the exhibition Light from the Middle East: New Photography, the result of a collaboration between the British Museum and the V&A, supported by the Art Fund, to collect photographs by Middle Eastern artists (Marta Weiss). Many of these photographs are not only true works of art in the beauty of their composition or in their technical skill but in addition have powerful stories to tell. Examples from this collection include works by Saudi artist Manal Dowayan who examines the role of women in Saudi society and Egyptian artist Youssef Nabil who photographed the elders of the Yemeni community in South Shields among the first Muslim migrants to the United Kingdom at the end of the 19th century, or John Jurajy who manipulates and inserts red plexi-glass into a photograph of the bombing of the American Embassy in Beirut in 1984. The aftermath of the US led invasion of Iraq in 2003 has also inspired powerful works: Iraqi artist Nabil who photographed the elders of the Yemeni community in South Shields among the first Muslim migrants to the United Kingdom at the end of the 19th century, or John Jurajy who manipulates and inserts red plexi-glass into a photograph of the bombing of the American Embassy in Beirut in 1984. The aftermath of the US led invasion of Iraq in 2003 has also inspired powerful works: Iraqi artist Nabil who photographed the elders of the Yemeni community in South Shields among the first Muslim migrants to the United Kingdom at the end of the 19th century, or John Jurajy who manipulates and inserts red plexi-glass into a photograph of the bombing of the American Embassy in Beirut in 1984.

For Egypt of the ‘Arab Spring’, Mohammed Abla features Tahrir square and flag-bearing demonstrators. For Syria, the dark paintings of Youssef Abdelke with his recurrent theme of three sinister figures presage the turmoil that is raging in Syria today.

Moving away from war to social issues, Yemeni artist Bouhra Almutawakkel has focused on the matter of the veil with a series of nine powerful photographs in which she progressively covers her sitters, a mother and daughter and her doll, with layers of the traditional Yemeni hijab until the last image which is entirely black. Almutawakkel did not set out to make work on this subject feeling that it was so often stereotyped, but she was drawn to it following her studies in Egypt during which she attended lectures by the veteran Egyptian feminist writer Nawal Al-Sa’dawi.

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a fascinating perspective, and so decided to interpret this photographically.

Turning to the work of other artists, it is interesting to look at four Iranian artists in the British Museum collection who focus on aspects of heritage and cultural tradition: Y.Z. Kami, in a work entitled Endless Prayer, creates a series of ‘bricks’ out of numerous and tiny brick-shaped pieces of paper, cut out of poetry and prayer books. These ‘bricks’ are then glued to the canvas in circular or spiralling patterns, which echo the architectural detailing of some Islamic domes. Inspiration for the spiralling patterns comes from the motion of Sufi dervishes in worship, particularly those of the Mawlawi order, founded by Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273). For Kami, the patterns reference the dome as a powerful integration of form and symbol. Sadegh Tirafkan, in Human Tapestry is drawn to the form of the Persian carpet. For him it is ‘a symbol of culture, seasonality, richness, diversity and continuity in time and in history. As such’ (he writes) ‘I have been obsessed by the parallelism and marriage between this symbolic, intricately loomed object and the people to which it belongs.’ This last alludes to the fact that this work, made up from the mass of tiny photographs, is also a commentary on the population explosion in Iran and the huge numbers of unemployed young people in the country.

Another popular theme is literature, and Fereydoun Ave is inspired by the stories of the Shahnama (Book of kings). In this work, he shows the hero Rustam in the guise of a pahlavan. The pahlavan tradition has ancient roots going back to the epic heroes of the pre-Islamic era. The most revered of these is Rustam, a jahan pahlavan (world hero), who could slay beasts with a single blow. In the Shahnama, Rustam embarks on a series of trials of strength and bravery called the Seven Labours. These involve journeys far afield and fraught with danger, during which the hero struggles with wild animals, demons and magicians. Here Rustam is seen in a desolate landscape with vultures and predatory creatures. However this is not simply about Rustam; for Ave, Rustam’s trials have been transferred to the trials of modern day man.

Golnaz Fathi is also inspired by literature. The work illustrated here is a set of three scrolls in which, against backgrounds of different colours, she has combined verses from the poems of the celebrated Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani in Arabic and juxtaposes them with verses of Persian poetry and pseudo writing. This is a hallmark of her style coming as she did from a long training of pure calligraphy from which she broke out preferring calligraphic abstraction. Qabbani’s poems include verses from the poignant Qasidat al-Hizn (the Epic of Sadness)

‘Your love entered me, my lady

cities of sadness,

and I before you had never entered

the cities of sadness

and I did not know at all

that tears are the person,

that a person without sadness

is a mere memory of a person’

(Nizar Qabbani)

The last works highlighted here are in different ways inspired by the tradition of talismans and talismanic shirts. The shirts are known principally from beautiful examples made in the Ottoman and Safavid eras, an example of which is in the Al-Sabah collection, Kuwait. They are generally covered with combinations of religious texts, and magic squares and were worn under armour in battle for protection. In X-Ray Talisman, Saudi artist and doctor Ahmed Mater al-Ziad surrounds the X-Ray figure with a border of numbers, letters and short texts, typical of the vocabulary of magic found on magic bowls or amulets made of paper and other materials and where repeated single letters are believed to enhance the power of the charm.

Iranian artist Bita Ghezaylayagh on the other hand, echoes the form of the talismanic shirt itself. Originally inspired by the dying art of the making of traditional shepherds cloaks in Iran, she embroidered over the cloaks in Persian the words ‘ martyrdom is the key to Paradise’ and placed over the surface of the cloak 1001 small keys. In this she is alluding ironically to the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) and the practice of sending young boys to fight who carried keys to Paradise in their hands for protection.

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The work made by artists of the Middle East today is rich and vibrant and full of interest. It can and should be considered alongside work made by international artists more widely where distinctions according to where an artist comes from are irrelevant. But there is another aspect to this material as well. For a museum of history such as the British Museum which collects and exhibits such works, it is interesting to see how, by placing works by Middle eastern artists within the context of the arts and cultural traditions of the region more broadly they can enhance and offer insights into particular narratives. The British Museum’s recent exhibition Hajj: journey to the heart of Islam (Venetia Porter) was one such case. Here contemporary art such as the work of Walid Siti was juxtaposed with historic manuscripts and other objects to provide a modern and refreshing perspective on an ancient but very living story.

Dr Venetia Porter is a curator responsible for the collection of Islamic and modern and contemporary art of the Middle East at the British Museum. She curated the exhibition Hajj: Journey to the heart of Islam (2012). Her publications include Arabic and Persian seals and Amulets in the British Museum (2012) and Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East (2006).
Sheikha Hussah and a delegation from Kuwait travelled to Jodhpur, India from 8 – 10 March 2013 to participate in the Jodhpur One World Retreat. The event was organised and hosted by His Highness Maharaja Gaj Singh II to raise money for the Indian Head Injury Foundation, which he and the Maharani founded.

HH the Maharaja created the organisation after his son, Yuvraj Shivraj Singh, suffered a traumatic brain injury and he discovered that India is known in medical circles as the “Brain Injury Capital of the World.” Today, the foundation has three primary objectives: to reduce the number of head injuries in India; to improve the outcome of head injury treatment; and to enhance the lives of head injury survivors.