



al-Fann

Art from the Islamic Civilization

from the al-Sabah Collection, Kuwait

Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien

Special Exhibition Hall 2nd Floor

March 22 - June 19, 2011

From March 22, 2011 the Kunsthistorisches Museum presents art from the Islamic world for the first time in Vienna. The exhibition offers visitors a comprehensive survey of a thousand years of Islamic civilization, documenting its wealth and variety, and its artistic development marked by its interaction with and respect towards other civilizations. On show are over 350 objects dating from the 8th to the 18th century and originating in countries as far apart as Spain in the West and India in the East. The show includes artworks in many different media - textiles and metalwork, ceramics and glass, miniatures and illuminated Koran manuscripts as well as objects made of stone and wood, and the jeweled arts, among them a gold coin weighing 1 kilogram that was minted for the Moghul emperor Shah Jahan (1627-58), who presented such coins as gifts of honour. Very few other examples have survived and this unique coin is exhibited in Vienna for the first time.

“These 350 objects document a thousand years of Islamic art. The virtuosity of these generally anonymous artists and the preciousness of the materials used is truly impressive; the artworks document both the succession of the most important dynasties and of the various centres of art and power: here we encounter Damascus and Bagdad, Cairo and Samarkand, Granada and Delhi”, said Director General Sabine Haag. “These loans from the al-Sabah Collection shown in Vienna for the first time offer a new and fascinating view of Islamic art and civilization. Artworks are always a manifestation of the interaction, the (peaceful) exchange between civilizations, and these masterpieces document, for example, the influence of classical art, Sasanian metalwork, Pharaonic weaving techniques or Chinese porcelain on Islamic art, and how the latter turned these inspirations into magnificent independent artworks. But perhaps the exhibition is also an invitation to replace our old Eurocentric view of art history with a historically more correct global view: think only of the cultural exchange that manifests itself in Gentile Bellini’s sojourn at the court in Istanbul, Marco Polo’s journey to China, Norman Sicily and Andalusia”.



The curator of the exhibition is a renowned scholar, Professor Giovanni Curatola, who teaches Archaeology and History of Islamic Art at the University of Milan and the University of Udine. Together with the curators of the al-Sabah Collection, Manuel Keene and Salam Kaoukji, he selected the artworks on show here from the 30.000 or more objects in the holdings of one of the world's finest collections of Islamic art.

The al-Sabah Collection

The collection was assembled by Sheikh Nasser al-Achmad al-Jaber al-Sabah, the son of the Amir of Kuwait, and his wife, Sheikha Hussah Sabah al-Salem al-Sabah, who presented it as a permanent loan to the Kuwait National Museum in 1983.

“The first date I must mention is July 1975”, writes Curatola in his introduction to the exhibition catalogue, “when Sheikh Nasser al-Sabah first showed his wife, Sheikha Hussah al-Sabah, a work of Islamic art - a magnificent enameled glass bottle dating from the Mameluk era (Egypt or Syria, fourteenth century) - that he had purchased while traveling. This marked the beginning of an extraordinary, and probably unrepeatabe, adventure, made possible by equal parts of intelligence, love, expertise, farsightedness, and curiosity ...”

The Exhibition

This comprehensive exhibition has two parts: the first offers a chronological survey in four stages of the development of Islamic art from its early beginnings to the important empires of the 16th century: the Ottoman, the Safavid, and the Moghul dynasties.

The second part of the exhibition focuses on selected topics or themes found throughout Islamic art. They are presented with the help of objects from different regions and periods. This, too, illustrates the depth and scope of Islamic art, and the artistic exchange across large distances as well between different artistic genres that characterize it.

The exhibition features sections dedicated to the art of calligraphy; to geometric patterns and compositions in which frequently-anonymous artists turned mathematical laws into pure art; on the arabesque - formally composed and endlessly repeated stylized vegetal motifs that document the artists' outstanding virtuosity and never-ending imagination; and to figurative depictions, the latter to debunk the cliché of the presumed rejection of figurative images in Islamic art.

And, last but not least, there is a selection of jeweled arts from Moghul India. The virtuosity of their execution and the fabulous wealth of colour and quality of the precious stones turn

this part of the exhibition into a veritable treasury, and these unique objects into a visual highlight of this rich exhibition. They document the renowned wealth of the al-Sabah Collection in this field. A small selection of coins at the beginning of the exhibition offers visitors a chronological survey of Islamic history.

For three months, a rich selection of large and small objects of breathtaking beauty is on show in the specially adapted galleries on the second floor of the Kunsthistorisches Museum: sumptuous illuminated manuscripts of the Koran and detailed miniatures that illustrate celebrated works of Arabic and Persian literature, marble capitals with Kufic inscriptions and small ivory caskets decorated with birds and plants, elegant bronze ewers and brightly-coloured, richly embellished enameled glass, carpets, tiles, heavy gold chains, courtly velvets, silks and mediaeval garments, huge precious stones and diamonds, daggers with jade hilts embellished with rubies and emeralds, wooden doors and turned lattice-panels, sumptuously decorated water-pipes, scientific instruments and even 9th century chess figures cut from rock-crystal.

The exhibition was first shown at the Palazzo Reale in Milan. Documenting the wealth of the Islamic world, it offers an important contribution to our understanding of a civilization and its art, its development and evolution that were often the result of its contact with other civilizations - be it in Sicily or Spain, Iran, India or China, along the silk road or Mediterranean trade-routes - making it a testimony of the vital dialogue between East and West. This is also the focus of the extensive lecture-series organized in conjunction with the exhibition.

“Even in the era of the ‘global village’ and of communications nothing else can provide the emotional and informational impact of an exhibition”, is how Sheikha Hussah al-Sabah summarized the exhibition’s rationale. “Art is still the best and most important testimonial and ambassador for what past generations were able to produce, and how they thought and felt, conveying a concrete sense of their sophistication. To represent this is not only a privilege but also a specific and inescapable duty of cultural institutions and the aim of this exhibition.”

PRESSEFOTOS

Page from a Koran manuscript
 Qayrawan, Tunisia (?), 9th century AD
 Ink, colours and gold on parchment
 145 x 210 mm
 © al-Sabah Collection Kuwait



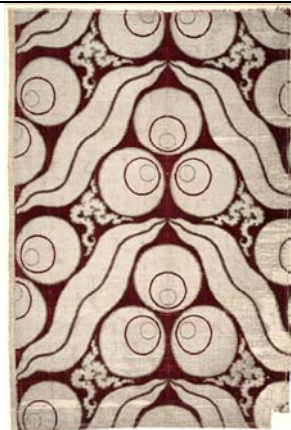
Chess piece (rook)
 Iraq, probably Basra, c. 9th century
 Cut and polished rock crystal
 4,2 x 4,8 cm
 © al-Sabah Collection Kuwait



Ivory casket with unicorns, birds and vegetal decorations
 Spain, early 11th century
 Lid and fittings later (but not modern) additions
 Ivory, painted; fittings: bronze
 10 cm x 7,5 cm
 © al-Sabah Collection Kuwait



Velvet fragment
 Turkey, middle of the 16th century
 Brokaded silk and voided velved with metal threads
 88 x 59 cm
 © al-Sabah Collection Kuwait



Page from a manuscript of Nizami's "Khamsa"

Depiction of the Prophet Mohammed's
night journey to Jerusalem

Illuminated manuscript: 22,5 x 14,5 cm

Iranian world, c. 16th century

Ink, colours and gold on paper

© al-Sabah Collection Kuwait

**Talismanic shirt**

Inscribed with the Koran and the 99 names
of God

India, probably late 15th century

Ink and colours on cotton fabric

50 x 92,5 cm

© al-Sabah Collection Kuwait

**Bowl**

Eastern Iranian world, probably Nishapur
10th century

White engobe and black slip painting
under transparent glaze

4,8 x 13,8 cm

© al-Sabah Collection Kuwait

**Tile**

Iran, 12th century

Fritware, covered with a turquoise glaze

25 x 24 cm

© al-Sabah Collection Kuwait



Enameled glass with depiction of two men hunting birds in wetlands

Egypt or Syria, 2nd half of the 13th century
 Enameled and gilded glass
 11,6 x 8 cm
 © al-Sabah Collection Kuwait



Page from an album showing a miniaturist at work

Northern India, early 17th century
 Ink, colours and gold on paper
 33 x 27,3 cm
 © al-Sabah Collection Kuwait



Crutch handle

India, probably Deccan
 c. 2nd quarter of the 17th century
 Carved from jade
 4,5 x 13 cm
 © al-Sabah Collection Kuwait



Gold necklace and pendant

Hyderabad, late 18th century
 Both set with diamonds,
 pendent with emerald
 Enameled back
 Gold, diamonds, emerald, enamel
 39 x 4 cm
 © al-Sabah Collection Kuwait



Dagger and scabbard

India, probably Deccan

Hilt, locket and chape, ca. mid 17th century

Scabbard, ca. early 18th century

Jade, gold, rubies, diamonds, emerald

Dagger: 35,5 x 5,3 cm

Scabbard: 28,3 x 4,6 cm

© al-Sabah Collection Kuwait



Dagger from the imperial Ottoman workshops

Hilt, guard and scabbard: Turkey, ca. 2nd half 16th century

Blade: probably India, 2nd half 16th century- 1st half 17th century

Jade, gold, rubies, diamonds, emerald

Dagger: 31,5 x 5,7 cm

Scabbard and dagger: 35 cm

© al-Sabah Collection Kuwait



Huqqa

India, probably Deccan, late 17th century AD

Jade, rubies, emeralds

19,6 x 18 cm

© al-Sabah Collection Kuwait





OPENING HOURS AND ENTRANCE FEES

Kunsthistorisches Museum Maria Theresien-Platz 1010 Vienna	Audio Guide (German, English)	€ 4,-
	Adults	€ 12,-
	concessions	€ 9,-
Tuesdays – Sundays 10 am – 6 pm	Vienna card holders	€ 11,-
Thursdays 10 am – 9 pm (Coin Collection closes at 6 pm)	Groups of 10 or over guided tour, p.p.	€ 8,- € 3,-
	children under 19	free
	Annual ticket	€ 29,-

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

An exhibition catalogue in German is published in conjunction with the exhibition.

FOR MORE INFORMATION PLEASE CONTACT

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