



FAAC

CHRONICLE

SPRING 2023

From the President's desk

Greetings! This newsletter focuses on the art and culture of the Ancient Middle East and the Islamic world. You'll find articles on art in the DIA's Ancient Middle Eastern and Islamic galleries, on figural imagery in Islamic art, and on contemporary art in the collections. Our DIA galleries include works from ancient Mesopotamia, Persia, Egypt, and many other places that reflect the richness of Ancient Middle Eastern and Islamic culture. We can learn more about the history, culture, and artistic traditions of these regions through their art, which has undergone transformational changes over the time periods represented at the DIA.

The DIA and FAAC recently hosted Hinamatsuri, Japanese Girls' Day, on March 5 to wish girls health and happiness and to celebrate Japanese culture. We had a record turnout, and visitors had an opportunity to experience a Japanese tea ceremony, view the hina doll display, see washi paper making, hear stories, learn ikebana (the art of flower arrangement), and practice origami. There were art displays, a calligraphy demonstration, beautiful kimono tying, and woodblock print demonstrations. Listeners were enthralled by MIYABI's melodious music performance on the koto, a 13-string zither and national instrument, in Kresge Court.

Friends of Asian Arts and Cultures Board of Directors

OFFICERS

- Anita Rajpal, President
- Jumana Cooper, Vice President
- Sharon Dow, Treasurer
- Freda Giblin, Recording Secretary
- Li Hsieh, Membership Chair

DIRECTORS

- Rouba Ali-Fehmi
- Jill Best
- Theresa Chang
- Taoqu Chen
- Karen Chopra
- Asuman Ilkim Erturk
- Meenu Gulati
- Mieko Inaba
- Robert Jacobs
- Saeed Khan
- Rhona Lee
- Rupali Lunani
- Alicia Masse
- Ali Moiin
- Emmy Peck
- Hema Rachmale
- Carol Stepanchuk
- Bob Tera
- Vasu Tolia
- Nurten Ural
- Fang Zhang

**HONORARY
DIRECTORS**

- Yee-Ho Chia
- David Morrison
- David Roden
- David Weinberg

DIA TEAM

- Katherine Kasdorf, Associate Curator
- Deborah Odette, Development Liaison
- Tarya Stanford, Administrative Assistant

On March 17 and 18, Katherine Kasdorf, associate curator, Arts of Asia and the Islamic World, led a group of FAAC members on a fascinating tour of Asia Week New York. Participants were introduced to museum collections, auction houses, art dealers, and other connoisseurs of art. We learned from the experts about the works we saw, appreciating their themes, symbolism, historical significance, and beautiful details. We saw buyers and collectors examining ceramics and other works of art under magnifying glasses to determine the value and quality of works that were coming up for sale. The sheer volume and beauty of both ancient and contemporary art on display made me feel like a dandelion drifting in a summer breeze!

As you explore our Ancient Middle Eastern and Islamic collections, read these newsletter articles, and learn about the historical contexts in which the works of art were created, please share your knowledge with other art lovers. Thank you for joining us in our shared mission.

Anita Rajpal
President, Friends of Asian Arts
and Cultures



FAAC members view a painting at the gallery of Oliver Forge and Brendan Lynch during Asia Week New York.

ON THE COVER

Mamluk, Syria or Egypt, *Bottle Made for the Rasulid Sultan Hizabr al-Din in Yemen*, 1296–1321, glass, gold, and enamel, 14 3/4 × 7 3/4 in. Detroit Institute of Arts, City of Detroit Purchase, 30.416.



Curatorial Update

Katherine Kasdorf

Associate Curator, Arts of Asia and the Islamic World,
Detroit Institute of Arts

Since early 2021, the Department of Arts of Asia and the Islamic World has collaborated with other curatorial departments at the DIA to expand the museum's collection of contemporary works by artists whose work and life experiences intersect with the diverse regions and cultural traditions represented in the gallery of Islamic art. While many of these acquisitions will be featured in a proposed rotation of contemporary art within the Islamic gallery, they also have potential for installations and special exhibitions of contemporary art and prints, drawings, and photographs.

If you saw last year's photography exhibition, *Conscious Response: Photographers Changing the Way We See* (July 22, 2022–January 8, 2023), you may have noticed four works by Farah Al Qasimi (born 1991 in Abu Dhabi), a New York-based artist whose color-saturated images explore Arab and Arab-American visual culture and identities. The DIA acquired nine photographs by Al Qasimi in 2021 (DIA nos. 2021.287–2021.295), many of them created in Metro Detroit during the artist's 2019 residency sponsored by Wayne State University and the Arab American National Museum. In images of people, like *Fourth of July Fireworks* and *Shisha*, Al Qasimi plays with representation and concealment, partially obscuring her subjects. In *WhatsApp Greeting*, made in Abu Dhabi in 2021, Al Qasimi shows her own hands holding a smartphone that displays a graphic with blessings in Arabic, popular among people of her parents' generation.

While Al Qasimi is a rising star with much of her career ahead of her, other acquisitions have focused on long-established artists. Zarina Hashmi (American, born in Aligarh, India, 1937–2020) was a leading artist of the South Asian diaspora during a career that spanned some six decades, between the late 1950s and 2020. Working in a variety of print and sculpture mediums, Zarina (who preferred to use only her first name) spent much of her career in New York, after spending time in Bangkok, New Delhi, Paris, Bonn, Tokyo, and Los Angeles. Travel, displacement, and geography are themes that recur in her work, informed by both her adult peregrinations and her family's temporary relocation to Pakistan during India's Partition in 1947. In 2021, the DIA acquired two print portfolios by Zarina. *Road Lines* (1996; DIA no. 2021.276) juxtaposes four etchings reminiscent of lane markings with a printed Urdu couplet by the poet Allama Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938). *Countries* (2003; DIA no. 2021.241) is a set of five woodblock prints representing contested regions. Labeled in both Urdu and English, the first four—*Chechnya*, *Iraq*, *Bosnia*, and *Afghanistan*—are represented as maps, in which Zarina calls attention to the arbitrary nature of national boundaries. The fifth, titled *Holy Land* in English and *Bayt al-Maqdis* in Urdu, consists of a thick vertical line—an abstraction that perhaps suggests the Holy Land is beyond representation.

These recent acquisitions join other works in the collection by contemporary artists with a relationship to

the Islamic world, such as Shirin Neshat (Iranian-American, born 1957) and Shiva Ahmadi (Iranian-American, born 1975). Ahmadi's *Al-Khidr* (2009; DIA no. 2010.31) was one of the first such works to enter the collection; recently, the artist donated an edition of her 2017 animation, *Ascend*, to the DIA (DIA no. 2021.30; this was the subject of Ahmadi's artist talk in March 2022, co-hosted by FAAC and FMCA). Further acquisitions are in progress. Through ongoing collaborations across curatorial departments, we are working to expand the stories we tell about both contemporary art and art of the Islamic world.



Farah Al Qasimi (Emirati, born 1991), *Shisha*, 2019, pigment print, 30 × 21 in. Detroit Institute of Arts, Museum Purchase, Albert and Peggy DeSalle Charitable Trust and Asian Art Deaccession Fund, 2021.289. Image courtesy The Third Line and Francois Ghebaly.



Babylonian, Mesopotamian, *Mushhushshu-Dragon*, 604–562 BCE, molded and glazed baked brick, 45 1/2 × 65 3/4 in. Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society Purchase, 31.25.

Welcome to the Gallery of Arts of the Ancient Middle East

Freda Giblin

Interpretive Program Volunteer at Detroit Institute of Arts
FAAC Board Secretary

The Arts of the Ancient Middle East (AME) Gallery contains the DIA's oldest objects, two polished axes from Syria that date to 8000–6000 BCE, and other

fascinating works that chronicle the course of different civilizations. Farming abounded in the Ancient Middle East, which allowed cities to grow and new technologies to develop:

metalworking, stone carving, writing, and ceramics. In the gallery, you will see examples of these technologies and works from the Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, and Roman Empires.

Pottery pieces from the Fertile Crescent cultures (Mesopotamia and the Levant) depict images such as mountains in *Jar with Mountain Designs* (DIA no. 30.452) and sacred temple bulls in *Bowl with Four Bulls, Part of a Temple Herd* (DIA no. 49.20), which may relate to culture and religion in the Ancient Middle East. The potter's wheel was invented here, long before the wheel became used on wagons or carts.

As agricultural technologies advanced, leading to surplus products, farmers needed a way of marking this new form of ownership, and one result was the creation of clay seals. How did this work? Imagine grain is stored in a shed with one wooden peg on the door and one wooden peg on the wall. Close the door and wrap a length of rope around the two pegs. Cover the ends of the rope with wax and stamp a clay seal with the image that identifies the owner. Over time, materials for seals changed from clay to soft stone and then to hard stone, with increasingly intricate designs.

In a display of cuneiform—wedge-shaped writing on clay—"letters" inside "envelopes" from 4000 years ago, like *Cuneiform Tablet with Receipt for Grain and Envelope* (DIA no. 19.24.27), provide examples of written records for the exchange of agricultural goods. In another part of the gallery, we see writing and sculpture on a stone carving alluding to victory by an important Assyrian king in *Tukul-apil-escharra III* (DIA no. 50.32). Nearby is a display of bronze and early iron weapons made by the Assyrians (900–612 BCE).

The highlight of the gallery is the *Mushhushshu-Dragon* (DIA no. 31.25) from the Ishtar Gate in Babylon, which represents the Mushhushshu—a composite of many animals—in gold and blue-colored glazed bricks. Babylonians ruled Mesopotamia from 612 to 539 BCE, after vanquishing the Assyrians, and their patron god was Marduk. The Mushhushshu was Marduk's symbol, so if you saw depictions of this creature, it meant that the gods were protecting you.

King Cyrus of Persia conquered the Babylonians, and art from the Persian Achaemenid Empire (539–331 BCE) includes stone carvings, like *Court Servant with Covered Tray* (DIA no. 31.340), as well as jewelry and lush metalware. At its height, this wealthy empire was the largest in the world, extending through parts of Greece, Asia Minor, the Levant, Egypt, India, and Central Asia. Achaemenid rule ended with the conquests of Alexander of Macedon.

Rome was the next empire to rule the Ancient Middle East, from 31 BCE to 476 CE. Visitors can marvel at the *Mosaic with Personification of the River Tigris* (DIA no. 40.127) from the floor of a triclinium (dining room) from an area near the major Roman port of Antioch. The tesserae, or pieces of stone mosaic, depict a river god adorned with reeds and native plants.

These are but a handful of the objects you will see in the Arts of the Ancient Middle East Gallery. The Friends of Asian Arts and Cultures cordially invites you to visit this gem of a gallery and explore these artworks and their rich historical significance.

The Status of Figural Representations in Islamic Art

Saeed Khan

Associate Professor of Teaching in
Near Eastern Studies and Global Studies,
Associate Director of Center for the Study of Citizenship,
Wayne State University
FAAC Board Member

A recent incident at Hamline University in Minnesota inadvertently revived the question of whether figural images of human beings, especially those of religious figures like the Prophet Muhammad, are permissible in Islamic art. Contrary to a Muslim student's objection to the presentation of an image of the Prophet in class on the grounds that it was an affront to her faith, the historical record proves that Islamic theology and figural imagery in art have not been so strictly at odds with one another.

The image of the Prophet in question is from *A Compendium of Chronicles*, an early 14th-century world history by Rashid-al-Din (1247–1318), a Persian Muslim who served in the Ilkhanid court of Greater Iran. It depicts the Archangel Gabriel conveying, according to Islamic tradition, the word of God to Muhammad—revelations compiled, according to Muslims, in the Holy Qur'an. The Qur'an is the supreme scriptural authority for 1.8 billion Muslims worldwide, who consider it to be the inerrant and unchanged divine word. Many scholars consider the *Compendium* to be a masterpiece of Persian manuscript painting.

Many Muslims believe that Islam prohibits any human representation, particularly in works of art, which may explain why much of Islamic art focuses on calligraphy and geometric patterns rather than figural imagery. The DIA's collection contains excellent examples of these artforms, including Qur'an manuscripts and folios, and an Iranian tile inscribed with the "Throne Verse" from the Qur'an, dating to the 1260s (DIA no. 25.57). But does the Qur'an actually ban figural depictions? In fact, there is no explicit proscription in the text.

Islamic civilizations have a rich history of art that has, by today's conception, pushed the envelope in ways that are considered provocative. Representations of the human form have existed at least since Islam's medieval period, 850–1250 CE, when knowledge production was as vibrant and profound as the arts. Far from being considered perilous or objects of potential worship, figural representations of the Prophet, members of his family, angels, and others were received as expressions of devotion that glorify these subjects with respect and admiration. Similarly, non-sacred figural imagery, such as Riza-i 'Abbasi's painting of a Young Man in European Clothing (DIA no. 58.334) and the

Mughal portrait of Sa'id Khan Zafarjang (DIA no. 2019.98.B) from the DIA's collection, have historically evaded controversy. Much of this artwork emanated from non-Arab sources, particularly in Persia and the Indian subcontinent, where a heritage of such expression was perceived not as heresy, but as high culture.

Today, we have access to a treasure trove of information and knowledge about the rich,

complex, and diverse history of Islamic art. Unfortunately, such access does not always prevent misunderstandings. Art museums provide an invaluable service in educating the public on the vibrancy and value of art traditions. A greater understanding of the range and diversity of Islamic art may help to historically contextualize recent controversies over depictions of the Prophet; it may also aid in recognizing the ways in which our perspectives in the present frame our interpretations of the past.



Mughal, Indian, *Portrait of Sa'id Khan Zafarjang*, Folio from the *Late Shah Jahan Album*, portrait ca. 1638–1650, borders 1650–1658, opaque watercolor, ink, and gold on paper, 15 3/16 × 9 7/8 in. Detroit Institute of Arts, Museum Purchase, Robert H. Tannahill Foundation Fund, 2019.98.B.

A Very Brief Account of Collecting and Displaying Islamic Art at the Detroit Institute of Arts

Heather Ecker

Independent Scholar, Curator, and Consultant
Former Curator of Islamic Art and Head of the
Department of Arts of Asia and the Islamic World,
Detroit Institute of Arts, 2005–2011

The collecting of Islamic art at the Detroit Institute of Arts began with William Valentiner, who was invited by the Detroit Arts Commission to become the museum's first director in 1924 with a mandate to construct a new building for the collection. Valentiner did more than this; he shifted the rather parochial mission of the museum as stated in the 1880s—to gather a strong collection of paintings by American painters born in the nineteenth century—to the encyclopaedic or universalist model that he had practiced earlier at the Metropolitan Museum.

Valentiner had probably gained exposure to Islamic art, and particularly to carpets, while working in Berlin as an assistant to Wilhelm von Bode in 1906. Indeed, his first acquisition in the field for the DIA was a Safavid-era silk animal carpet from the period of Shah Tahmasp (1524–1576) offered by his friend, Edsel Ford, in 1925 (DIA no. 25.23). By 1929, Valentiner had hired a curator of Islamic art, Mehmet Aga-Oglu, who remained with the museum, both as an employee and as a volunteer, until 1938.

In the 1930s, Aga-Oglu acquired important works of art for the collection including the magnificent Timurid Qur'an on Chinese paper (1450–1460, DIA no. 30.323) and the enameled bottle made in

Egypt for a Rasulid Sultan (1296–1321, DIA no. 30.416). In the 1940s, the focus shifted to textiles under textile curator Adele Coulin Weibel, who was also responsible for Islamic art. After the 1940s, there was very little collecting of Islamic art until the 1970s to early 2000s, when some works were acquired by Elsie Holmes Peck, curator of Middle Eastern Art, who also cared for the collection of Islamic Art. In my capacity as curator of Islamic Art and head of the Department of the Arts of Asia and the Islamic World (2005–2011), I acquired some important works of art for the collection, including the rare early Iznik blue-and-white charger from Ottoman Turkey (DIA no. 2006.56).

The present galleries of Islamic art opened in February 2010—a project that took almost five years. It followed the much larger reconsideration of the collections that culminated in the museum-wide reinstallation of 2007. The gap was due, in part, to my arrival at the museum in 2005, when the larger reinstallation was already underway, and the financial crash of 2008. As a result of the project's distinct timeline, gallery designers Staples & Charles could give more focus to the project. For example, they created innovative casework for displaying manuscripts and textiles that are both accessible for curators (they slide

out like drawers) and comfortable for visitors (with wood rails for leaning). This concept was developed to allow for a more intimate experience of objects that are neither hung vertically like Western paintings nor placed on pedestals like sculpture. Traditionally, a manuscript is read from a rahla or bookstand, which holds the pages at a gentle diagonal, and we recreated this posture with angled mounts. The lighting in the casework—strips of LED lights controlled by a dimmer—was also an innovation at the time.

The gallery project entailed a collection review that uncovered works in the collection whose importance had not been recognized, such as the impressive early Ottoman mosque candlestick in tombak (a typically Ottoman type of gilded copper; DIA no. 22.200). The candlestick is quite early, ca. 1500, and has fretwork panels over textile, an unusual feature. The textile, originally red, would have provided a vibrant color contrast with the gold surface. Such large candlesticks were typically produced in pairs and placed on either side of the mihrab, the decorated niche that signals the qibla wall that faces the direction of the Ka'ba at Mecca, the focus of Muslim prayer. The DIA candlestick came out of Turkey in the early 1920s, a period of tumult between the abolition of the Ottoman Sultanate and the establishment of the modern Republic under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938). It came into the hands of Georges Demotte, a controversial Belgian art dealer responsible for disassembling important manuscripts, such as the

Great Mongol Shahnama (DIA no. 35.54). Indeed, the candlestick may have been one of the last pieces he sold, as he was shot in a hunting accident in 1923.

When the candlestick was found in storage, it had been coated in green wax, probably by the dealer to cover a botched conservation treatment to restore the gold surface, which appears to have been partially scraped off. The DIA's conservation department worked assiduously to remove the wax and clean the candlestick for display. In the gallery, the mis-en-scène was completed by commissioning a large beeswax candlestick to suggest the warm lighting in its original setting.

The gallery was conceived thematically, a concept that governed the DIA's installations at the time. One important idea was to show the diversity, sometimes only historically, of the peoples of the Islamic lands by creating a rotating exhibition

within the gallery called *Sacred Writings* supported by loans from partner institutions. The department also worked with the Department of Contemporary Art to collect and display contemporary art from the Islamic lands and their diasporas. In recent years, Katherine Kasdorf, associate curator of the Arts of Asia and the Islamic World, has made new acquisitions such as the exquisite page from the *Late Shah Jahan Album* (DIA no. 2019.98) that continue to bring elegance and depth to the collection and to gallery visitors.



Ottoman, Turkish, *Mosque Candlestick*, ca. 1500, gilded copper (tombak) and wool, 30 × 23 1/2 in. Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society Purchase, 22.200.

FAAC BOOK AND MOVIE CLUB

Springing forward in 2023, the Book and Movie Club continues to be an essential tool where FAAC members meet, discuss, and learn from books and movies about the cultures that the FAAC Auxiliary Galleries represent. As a person of an Arabic heritage background, I personally learned how we are all intertwined through religion, food, clothing, and music. The areas of Asia and Asia Minor juxtapose many cultures. On the surface, we may seem so different, but underneath, we may have shared histories, which have influenced each other's cultures. Our readings, viewings, and discussions of *The Tale of Genji*, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta*, *The Assassin*, and *Ayla* affirmed that we can come together through art and culture to have exchanges that bring us closer together.

For the end of this season, a special thanks goes to David Roden, president and director of the Consular Corps of Michigan and honorary consul for the Republic of Korea, for his perspective on the history of the relationship between Korea and Turkey at the time of the heartwarming true story *Ayla: The Daughter of War*, and to our virtual guest speaker Ross E. Dunn, professor emeritus of History at San Diego State University, where he taught African, Islamic, and world history, and associate director of the National Center for History in the Schools at UCLA. And a special thanks to Freda Giblin and David Morrison for all the input and guidance that they always provide. PLEASE COME JOIN US!

Jumana Cooper
FAAC BOOK AND MOVIE CLUB COORDINATOR

REMINDER: Further details about meetings will be sent to members who register for the FAAC book and/or movie clubs. To attend a Book or Movie Club meeting, please email Jumana Cooper at jumana@comcast.net

LEADERS: Jumana Cooper, Freda Giblin, David Morrison, Emmy Peck, Anita Rajpal
COORDINATOR: Jumana Cooper

Book Club Discussion

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 29, 2023 (ON ZOOM)
The Adventures of Ibn Battuta: A Muslim Traveler of the Fourteenth Century (University of California Press, 2004), by Ross E. Dunn

Movie Club Discussion

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 14, 2023 (ON ZOOM)
Bosta directed by Philippe Arcatingi
A 2005 Lebanese film, *Bosta* is a story of young Lebanese artists who meet again, after being separated, and tour different cities of Lebanon in an old bus, performing a techno version of the dabkeh that shocks conservatives, but moves forward towards the future.
Netflix:
<https://www.netflix.com/watch/81003917?source=imdb>

WEDNESDAY AUGUST 9, 2023 (ON ZOOM)
TBD

[Learn how to become a member of FAAC >](#)



FAAC Book Club members meet over Zoom to discuss *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta*.



FAAC Spring and Summer Events Recent and Upcoming Programs

Visit Us:
[DIA >](#)
[DIA FAAC >](#)



2023 MARCH

Sun, March 5 | 10:00 a.m. | DIA onsite
Hinamatsuri (Japanese Girls' Day)

2023 APRIL

National Arab American Heritage Month

Sun, Apr 2 | 2:00 p.m. | Kresge Court
Performance: National Arab Orchestra
Takht Ensemble

Tue, Apr 4 | 6:00 p.m. | DFT
Lecture: Dr. Margaret S. Graves,
"Ceramics from the Islamic World at the
DIA: A History in Fragments"

Fri, Apr 14 | 7:00 p.m. | Kresge Court
Performance: Emma Aboukasm Trio

Sat, Apr 15 | 2:00 p.m. | DFT
Film: *The Tower*

Sun, Apr 23 | 2:00 p.m. | Kresge Court
Performance: Tammy Lakkis

2023 MAY

Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month



Fri, May 5 | 7:00 p.m. | Rivera Court
Opening Remarks and Performance:
Hmong Cultural Journey

Sun, May 7 | Noon | Art-Making Studio
Guest Artist Workshop: Sajeev
Visweswaran

Fri, May 12 | 7:00 p.m. | Rivera Court
Performance: University of Michigan's
Gamelan Ensemble

Sun, May 14 | Noon | Art-Making
Studio
Guest Artist Workshop: Louise Jones
(Ouizi)

Fri, May 19 | 7:00 p.m. | Rivera Court
Performance: *Asian American Pacific
Islander Celebration Show*

Sun, May 21 | Noon | Art-Making
Studio
Guest Artist Workshop: Katie Yamasaki

Fri, May 27 | DFT
3:00 p.m. | Closing Remarks and
Performance: *Objects at Play*

2023 JUNE

Sun, Jun 4 | 11:00 a.m. | DIA onsite
FAAC Sustaining Members Event

2023 JULY

July 19–23 | Various venues
Concert of Colors (details TBA)