TOUR OF ROOM 1

Arranged along the entrance wall are a group of inscribed marble tombstones from 7th-century Egypt. In accordance with the Hadith, Islamic law forbids graves to be ornamented or to record the name of the deceased, in order to prevent sanctification or worship of the dead; a plain stone is the only marker permitted. However, it is clear from the large number of surviving funerary monuments, ranging from plainly decorated tombstones to ornate mausoleums, that this rule was violated from the very beginnings of the Islamic era. The texts inscribed on early gravestones have a specific content and are basically statements of faith and submission. They begin with an invocation to the merciful and compassionate God, and continue with standard phrases (for example the declaration of faith in one true God), passages from the Qur'an, and finally the name of the deceased, a prayer of blessing and the date of death.

The marble tombstone to the left of the door bears a floral Kufic inscription recording the name of al-Hasan, son of Hafs, son of ‘Umar, son of Yazid al-Tay’s, who died on the third day of Ramadan in AH 247 (863). Beyond the map are four 7th-century tombstones; the last is that of al-Husayn, son of Yusuf, son of Yazid, son of al-Jarrah al-Khurasani, with the date AH 252 (864) (fig. 24). Beyond is a basalt tombstone from southern Arabia, with the name ‘Uthman, son of Asem, son of al-Bistami, who died on the 20th day of Rajab in AH 473 (1080) (fig. 48).
Lustre painting, one of the major achievements of Islamic ceramics, originated at Samarra in Iraq, the capital of the Abbasid state from 836 to 883. This technique involves the application of metal oxides to a glazed ceramic object, which is fired under special conditions to acquire a brilliant colored surface similar to that of vessels made of precious metals (fig. 15). Although lustre painting was used in Egyptian glassware of the pre-Islamic era, it only appears on pottery in the 9th century. The vegetal and geometric designs on early specimens often reflect the motifs of late antique glasswork.

During the 10th century the production centres of lustre-painted ceramics moved from Iraq to Egypt. Iraqi art remained a strong influence at first, but gradually imagery and decorative styles took on many features from the rich Egyptian tradition. Birds, hares (fig. 48), poets, and fish, as well as imaginary creatures such as harpies, became standard motifs, rendered in accordance with the Islamic aesthetic which demanded that the entire background be covered with secondary decorative elements.

The frequent representation of scenes from court life showing courtiers drinking and playing musical instruments or servants taming wild animals (figs. 11-12, 31 and 31-32) is associated with the revival of the Greco-Roman tradition in the Fatimid era. Few examples of contemporary painting have survived, and these ceramics are an invaluable source of information on the fabrics, costume and other artefacts of the period.
Inscriptions on household objects were a standard feature of Islamic decoration from earliest times, since even the illiterate understood that their presence was auspicious (figs. 25 and 50). A number of Fatimid ceramic vessels display ornamental benedictory inscriptions in which the lettering acquires foliate finals which combine harmoniously with the vegetal decoration covering the rest of the surface.

On the lid of the case is a fragment of an inscribed plate which dates from the reign of Caliph al-Hakim (996-1021) according to the inscription “A work of Muslim, son of al-Dahhan, to please Ilyas al-Ishani in his day.” Next to it are two oil lamps from 12th-century Egypt. Their shape—a spherical body, a tall flared rim and a long nozzle—typical of the period.

On a stand beyond Case 1 are two 11th-12th-century alabaster jars and a marble base from Egypt (fig. 54). The bases, known in Arabic as aljag, served to support large porous earthenware vessels with a pointed end from which water dripped and collected in the basin. The alabaster vessel, which does not belong to this particular basin, was used for the storage of water. On the wall above is a marble fragment from a 9th-century inscribed Coptic censaph. The text is a passage from the Qur’an (9:5), “Let not then this present life deceive you, nor let the Great Deceiver deceive you about God.”

54 Alabaster jar and marble base with inscribed text. Egypt, 11th-12th c. H. 32 cm. (12x02, 138225)

55 Drawing of an inscribed copper alloy dish. Egypt, 11th c. D. 20.5 cm. (127440)

56 Bronze lamp with engraved decoration and inlaid copper. Eastern Iran or Afghanistan, late 12th-early 13th c. H. 19 cm. (122000)

In the first centuries of Islam everyday metal artefacts were mostly made of copper alloy. They vary only slightly from the equivalent objects of late antiquity, the differences lying in the decorative motifs and in the use of Arab benedictory inscriptions, which became increasingly common after the 9th century. On the top shelf is a hammered dish from 11th-century Egypt with interlaced circles and a Kufic inscription expressing good wishes for the owner (fig. 55). The dotted motifs are often found on Egyptian copperware and are an imitation of the ornamentation on silver artefacts.

The bird-shaped finials date from the 9th to the 13th century and were attached to pins, metal vessels and other objects. The shelf below contains small cosmetics and perfume bottles and oil lamps, all from 8th-10th-century Egypt: the three-nozzled lamp is a type found in Iran and Egypt after the 8th century. The oil lamps in the shape of a small bowl also have an Egyptian provenance. The two tall-footed lamps came from Central Asia, probably eastern Iran or present-day Afghanistan, and date from the late 12th-early 13th century. The intact example with a lid and a handle surmounted by a small bird has four discs of inlaid copper and bears wishes for good fortune (fig. 56). The sparing use of copper suggests a dating in the early phase of inlaid metalwork, a type of ornamentation which developed in the area of Herat.
tour of room I

Next to it is a bucket from 10th-11th-century Egypt, decorated with a Kufic inscription wishing health and long life. On the same shelf is a cast mortar ornamented with lozenges and lotus-shaped bosses, probably from Iran and dating from the late 12th-early 13th century (Fig. 57). Flanking the group are two jugs from 6th-7th-century Egypt with an elaborate rectangular openwork handle, which belong to the tradition of Coptic metalwork.

The three basins in the middle of the case come from 11th-12th-century Egypt and are typical examples of Fatimid metalwork. They bear an engraved decoration of scrolls and heart-shaped motifs, together with Kufic inscriptions of good wishes for the owner embellished with foliate and floral motifs (Fig. 58).

The steel jar with spherical weights and hooked chains were made in Syria or Egypt in the 8th-9th century. Such portable balances were used all over the late Roman and Byzantine world, but the non-figurative ornamentation on the weights may point to a date after the Arab conquests (Fig. 59). Other objects in the case include a ewer with a vase-shaped thumb-rest, probably from 17th-century Syria, and a lampstand from 12th-century eastern Iran, with engraved birds and a beneficent inscription. The lamps were placed on a tray attached to the top. A bucket with inlaid copper and silver inscriptions and representations of harpies and birds comes from 12th-century Iran or Transoxiana. Its shape is similar to that of the Bibracte bucket, now in the Hermitage, St Petersburg, which was made in 1143 in the same region and is the oldest known example of this type of inlaid metalwork.

One example which survives is the 11th-century Fatimid mirror (Fig. 60). It is faced with hammered silver and decorated with heart-shaped motifs and a beneficent Kufic inscription. The silver bottle fragment with an inscription in niello, dating from the 11th century, was purchased in Egypt but is probably Iranian, as a heard of similarly decorated silver objects belonging to Vekil bin Marun, a local ruler, and dating from circa 1000, was found in north-west Iran.

Arab sources describe the Fatimid palace treasury as containing a vast quantity of precious objects of every kind — jewels, gem-encrusted swords, mirrors, rock crystal and ivory artefacts, perfume bottles, silk fabrics and furniture. In the reign of Caliph al-Mustansir (1036-1094), discontented mercenaries (noted the treasury and its contents were dispersed far and wide. Some objects were sold in the Cairo bazaars, and a few even ended up in the treasuries of western European churches. Most were melted down to be made into coins, so that silver objects of the early Islamic period are now very rare.
Hanging on the rear wall are items of gold jewellery with filigree and granulated decoration from 8th-12th-century Egypt, Syria and Iran (fig. 39). Below is a gold belt ornament, possibly from Samarra; the minute granulation and the absence of the typically Fatimid openwork filigree suggest a dating in the 10th century (fig. 63), while comparable belt fittings were found in the Bekaa valley in Lebanon, together with a hoard of later ornaments.

The gold earrings from Spain, inscribed "In the name of God the Merciful, the Compassionate, may God bless the Prophet Muhammad", date from the 12th century (fig. 61); similar earrings were found in Majarca inside a small vase which contained coins of the period. The exceptionally beautiful 12th-century Iranian ring with a rectangular bezel showing human figures on either side of a tree (fig. 63) may depict the "tree of life" or a Zoroastrian fire-altar.

In the middle of the case are Egyptian rock crystal artefacts dating from the 10th-11th century - a plaque and two small cosmetic bottles, the smaller with a relief Kufic inscription reading: "May the beauty of God be with him" (fig. 64). Rock crystal is a precious mineral which the Arabs greatly prized for its purity and durability. Although the Fatimid treasury is recorded as having a large number of such objects, few survive today. On the right is a glass bottle with bevelled decoration from Egypt but probably made in 9th-10th-century Iran, as similar glass vessels have been found at Nishapur.

The case contains a number of bone and ivory panels, probably furniture ornaments. The two largest (figs. 66 and 37) date from the 8th century and bear the foliate decoration found in the palaces built by the Umayyad princes on the edge of the Syrian desert. The other panels, including one with a typical Fatimid representation of a musician (fig. 65), were made in the 10th-11th century. Other bone objects are small bottles with an appliqué, which contained kohl (eye make-up), toggle spindle whorls and dols from 10th-11th-century Egypt (fig. 66). Similar dolls have been found in the excavations at Fustat.

Fig. 65: Fragment of an ivory plaque with a musician
Egyp. 8th c.
L. 5.5 cm. (14351)

Fig. 66: Bone doll
Egyp. 10th-11th c.
H. 15.8 cm. (19737)
tour of room I

At the front of the case are moulds for making jewellery, one of which depicts a courtier playing the flute (fig. 46), and gold and silver coins dating from the 8th to the 13th century (figs. 23 and 68). A characteristic feature of late 7th-century Arab coins is the use of ornamental inscriptions declaring faith in God, and recording the place and date of minting and the name of the ruler. Coins with purely pictorial motifs are extremely rare. The two displayed here, which bear the name of the Seljuk Sultan of Konya Kaikhusraw II (1236-1245), depict an emblematic lion and a sun—the zodiacal symbol of Leo which was the birth sign of the Sultan's Georgian wife (fig. 67).

Information regarding the furniture of palaces and mansions of the early Islamic period is scarce, but representations in later miniatures and on ceramic ware suggest that rulers would have sat cross-legged on seats such as this. On the same shelf is a 11th-century decorative plaque from a mosque with two passages from the Qur'an (18, 19 and 999X, 73, 74). The portable mihrab intended for private worship and inscribed with the names of members of Muhammad's family and of Shi'ite imams dates from the 10th century (fig. 70), and is of a type used by Shi'ites in their daily prayers to indicate the direction of Mecca.

67 Silver coin of the Seljuk Sultan Kaikhusraw II, Konya, 1236-1245. D: 2.1 cm. (60N196-A) Of the property of Panapoticos, Shemardz and Akhzelski, Mourada in memory of their parents, Michaelis and Doris Mouzakis.

68 Gold dinar of the Almohad Caliph Abu Yusuf Ya'rub, Spain or North Africa, 1196-1199. D: 2 cm. (5027)

69 Fragment of a carved wooden seat. Egypt, C. 9th c. H: 30 cm. (1948)

70 Portable wooden mihrab. Egypt, 10th c. H: 15.6 cm. (9403)
tour of room I

On either side are 11th-century plaques decorated with animals and birds interspersed with vegetal motifs (fig. 72) and smaller 10th-century plaques with a Kufic inscription proclaiming the supremacy of God. At the front of the case are two sections from a late 10th-century inscribed wooden mosque frieze. The foliate Kufic script, in which certain characters terminate in bulb-palmate forms, and others terminate in leaves, is typical of the Fatimid period. The inscription quotes one of the most popular passages of the Qur'an, the so-called "verse of the Throne" (ii. 255), which proclaims the absolute sovereignty of God (fig. 71). The verse was first used as a feature of the architectural decoration of religious buildings, notably on the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. On either side are 12th-century decorative plaques from the panelling of an Egyptian interior.

On the rear wall of the room are several important examples of 8th- and 9th-century woodcarving from Iraq. The central recess contains two doors which were found near Baghdad and date from the second half of the 9th century. One of these, a double-panelled door (fig. 35), is a superb example of late Umayyad art, depicting the so-called "tree of life" under a lobed arch in the midst of dense foliage of vine leaves. Umayyad art blends the art of late antiquity with that of Sassanian Iran, a legacy to the Islamic world from the peoples they had conquered.

To the right are three 9th-century door panels from Samarra, the early Abbasid capital in Iraq, which were found in a rock-cut sepulchre at Tikrit in northern Iraq as sections of the coffins of two Assyrian Christian bishops, Athenasius and Ignatius. The middle door (fig. 28) probably comes from the throne room of the palace of Jawsh al-Khaqani, whose marble wall renovations contained similar ornamentation. It was during the building of Samarra that many of the distinctive features of Islamic art—notably the marked stylisation of vegetal motifs—became established. On the left of the recess is a large reed floor mat (fig. 73), dating from the 18th century, with the Kufic inscription: 'Perfect blessing and absolute well-being and constant happiness to the owner; this which was commissioned from the royal workshop of Tiberias'. The workshop is known from Arabic sources to have been an important weaving centre in the eastern Mediterranean, and this unique inscription has been a useful tool in determining the provenance of similar uninscribed reed artefacts.
During Muhammad's lifetime and the first years of the hijra the Qur'an was transmitted orally, like the rich corpus of pre-Islamic poetry, but over the course of time certain passages began to be written down on parchment, bone and other inferior materials. During the reign of the Orthodox Caliph 'Uthman (644-656) the decision was taken to produce the first complete official version of the Qur'an, which has been preserved unchanged to this day, and to destroy all other versions. Between the 9th and the 11th century an angular form of script with well-defined vertical and horizontal lines, known as Kufic after the city of Kufa in southern Iraq, became the accepted vehicle for recording the Qur'an. Gilded decoration can be found in the titles of each chapter and in the medallions that separate the text every five or ten verses. From the 11th century onwards Kufic began to be replaced by the more rounded lettering of cursive script.

The case contains two particularly interesting Qur'an manuscripts: a 9th-century North African parchment with the 10th chapter 'Janaz' (Q. 10), in Kufic script (fig. 74), and a page of a paper Qur'an from western Iran or Iraq (late 12th century). The text of the latter, written in cursive script with gold outlines and red and blue vowel markings, is from the second chapter "Caw" (Q. 218-219).

The remaining exhibits in the case are drawings and illustrated fragments from manuscripts, which come from Egypt and are dated from the 10th to the 14th century, and a section of a 12th-13th-century book cover, gilded and ornamented with an embroidered geometric design, also from Egypt. The cathedral of Cairo contained more than one million volumes of literary, historical, and scientific texts, but a large number of manuscripts were lost when the library was destroyed in the 12th century. The few surviving items are mostly fragments of illuminated manuscripts or preliminary sketches for woodcarvings, fabrics and other artefacts (fig. 75).

To the right is a paper scroll with a stamped Qur'anic text in cursive script (chapters I, CXIV, CXXI, CXIII) and prayers (fig. 76). It was made in 12th-13th-century Egypt and was worn in a cylindrical amulet to protect the owner from the evil eye. Block-printing on paper or parchment, probably using wooden stamps, was a technique which, according to archaeological evidence from Fustat, originated in the Fatimid era.
Textile production was the most highly developed industry of the Islamic world, and we know from Arabic written sources that a great variety of materials and techniques were employed. Luxurious fabrics were produced under strict state control, as they were symbols of social status and prestige offered by the Caliph to selected members of his court and family and to foreign emissaries. Inscribed royal fabrics, known as tiraz, mention the name of the Caliph, the amir or the official in charge of the workshop, the place where the fabric was made, the date of the commission and, occasionally, the name of the weaver himself. The case contains four examples. On the left is a linen fragment from Egypt with a woven inscription mentioning the Abbasid Caliph al-Mut'amin (862–866).

Such inscriptions are rare, as al-Mut'amin's reign lasted only three years, during the period when Samarra was the capital of the Abbasid state. In the centre are two linen tiraz pieces from the reign of the Abbasid Caliph al-Muti' 944–974 (fig. 36). Al-Muti' was the last Abbasid Caliph prior to the conquest of Egypt by the Fatimids, and these tiraz are among the last woven in Egyptian workshops for rulers of Iraq. On the right is a linen tiraz fragment which was used as a turban (fig. 77). The two rows ofHorizontal Kufic script state that the fabric was made to a commission from the Fatimid Caliph al-Aziz 975–996 in AH 377 or 379 at Tinris, a famous weaving centre in the Nile delta.

Another inscribed fabric is part of a shawl from Yemen, dating from the 10th century. The embroidered white inscription quotes a passage from the first chapter of the Qur'an (1, 5–11) (fig. 78). Fabrics with a rhythmically repeated linear pattern, known as rkat, are produced through a special dyeing technique and are a typical product of the Yemeni weaving industry.

Beside it is part of a woolen wall hanging depicting a musician playing the 'ud, a stringed instrument, from 8th–9th-century Egypt (fig. 30). The facial features and the hairstyle of the musician recall the painting on murals and lustre ceramics from Samarra, which influenced Egyptian art of the early Islamic period. At the left of the case is a piece of linen fabric from Egypt, with a portrayal of a male figure, perhaps a Caliph, standing under an inscribed arch with a hanging lamp and raising his arms, possibly in an attitude of prayer (fig. 47). The fabric dates from the 12th century and is also ornamented with rows of birds, fish and heart-shaped motifs.
The glassmakers of the Islamic era inherited a long tradition from both the eastern Mediterranean and Iran. A large number of glass vessels, mainly household articles, embellished with simple motifs, have been found in excavations at Samarra, Nishapur and Fustat. The most common decorative techniques were blowing the molten glass into a mould (fig. 80) and incised, painted, applied and impressed ornamentation.

On the left of the case are two bottles from Iran. The larger of the two has been attributed to the 12th-13th century on the basis of the technique used (fig. 81), although a similar bottle was found in a cemetery at Thebes (fig. 81) together with finds dating from between the 14th and the 16th century. The smaller bottle is a 10th-11th century pilgrim's flask which contained a scrap of paper with an inscription in a cursive Arabic script. On the right-hand side of the case is a bottle with honeycomb decoration from 10th-11th century Iran (fig. 79). The shape of the bottle, with its cylindrical body, conical neck and disc-shaped mouth, is typical of Iranian workshops of the Abbasid era. It was produced from a mould, a technique that became popular in the 10th century and facilitated the mass production of glass articles. The honeycomb pattern is an imitation of cut glass ornamentation, which required considerable time, skill and experience.

In the front is a small bottle for kohl powder, a type of eye make-up. It comes from Egypt and dates from the 8th-9th century (fig. 81). The circular base is made of steatite and bears an incised Kufic inscription which indicates the purpose of these bottles: 'In the name of God, the blessing of God on the owner of the kohl bottle'. On either side are two lustre-painted vessels, both from 9th-10th century Egypt (fig. 82). Lustre decoration on glass originated in Egypt in the 4th-5th century and is also found on pottery from the 9th century onwards. Identical decorative motifs and craftsmen's signatures found on both materials indicate that the same workshops produced both glass and ceramic wares.
The top shelf contains jugs from northern Syria or northern Mesopotamia which date from the 12th-13th century (fig. 84). The ornate relief decoration was produced by the use of a mould. Water was stored in unglazed jugs made of porous clay in order to keep it cool, and some vessels had a filter on the inside of the rim to protect the water from insects and impurities. Examples of 9th-12th-century Egyptian filters can be seen on the middle shelf. They display a variety of decorative motifs—animals, birds, human figures, inscriptions, as well as vegetal and geometric designs (figs. 45 and 85).

The other objects on the shelf also come from Egypt: a small, square, 11th-century clay box (fig. 86) with relief ornamentation, and a number of round clay bread stamps from the 10th to 12th century with vegetal and epigraphic motifs and animal figures (fig. 87). At either end of the shelf is a zoomorphic pouring spout from a 12th-13th-century water jug, probably made in northern Mesopotamia.

Towards the front of the case are sections from rectangular plaster vessels from 11th-century Egypt, which were probably used to keep food warm; the typically Fatimid moulded ornamentation includes inscriptions, geometric designs and animal figures. In front are variously shaped stone oil lamps from 7th-10th-century Iraq and Egypt (fig. 88). The lamp with a single nozzle and a raised handle, bearing a pseudo-epigraphic design, comes from Egypt or Palestine and dates from the 8th-9th century. At either end are sections of stucco architectural decoration; the one on the right has the stylised vegetal design characteristic of 9th-century Iraq, and those on the left, with inscriptions and traces of colour, are from 10th-11th-century Egypt.

On the wall beyond the case is a section of an inscribed marble cista from Egypt, dating from the mid-9th century (fig. 261). The inscription, with foliate Kufic motifs, contains the invocation to God: "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate". During the 9th century the simple Arabic Kufic script gradually became ornamented with leaves or palmettes. On a stand in front are a marble receptacle and an inscribed base from 12th-century Egypt (fig. 89). The elaborate decoration of naked figures and the beneficent inscription "Perfect blessing and grace and eternal glory and eternal happiness and eternal good luck" suggest that the base came from the courtyard of a Cairo mansion or hammam (Turkish bath). These bases (feigas) are often recorded as offerings to mosques or religious foundations and were used by both Muslims and Copts.
The right-hand side of the case contains household pottery, ornamented with splashes of painted glaze, from 10th-11th century Egypt. By controlling the random trickle of the colour onto the surface of the vessel, the craftsman could produce radial designs, vegetal motifs and inscriptions. Pottery of this type is usually attributed to the oasis of Fayyum, although many specimens have been found at Fustat, the first capital of Muslim Egypt, now known as Old Cairo. The exhibits here include a large dish with a Kufic inscription on a white surface, expressing wishes for good luck and blessings on the owner (Fig. 90).

Also from Egypt are the 9th-10th century potsherds and the oil lamps with moulded relief ornamentation. A small dish on the left has an interesting design of two confronted swans or peacocks with intertwined necks (Fig. 92). The pottery fragments with polychrome decoration and representations of animals and mounted warriors riding in procession come from 10th-11th-century Tunisia (Fig. 91).

At the back of the case are slip-painted ceramics from eastern Iran and Transoxania, dating from the 10th century. Painting with polychrome slip was a technique developed at Nishapur and Samarkand, which were leading centres during the era of the Samanids (819-1005), the semi-autonomous Iranian rulers of the region, when achievements in the visual arts were accompanied by the cultivation of Arabic learning and the birth of modern Persian language and literature. The bowl from Nishapur, whose sole decoration is a simple Kufic beneficent inscription (Fig. 94), is a masterpiece of this type of ceramics.

In the centre is a group of 12th-century ceramics from Fustat with incised decoration and coloured glaze. During this period Egyptian potters were attempting to develop a clay that was near-transparent in texture, and its discovery proved of great significance to the production of luxury ceramics. A small dish bears Islamic-style vegetal scroll motifs, but its shape resembles that of Chinese celadon ware, whose importation into Egypt is attested by archaeological evidence from Fustat (Fig. 93).
Other items are a large bowl from Samarkand ornamented with aurochs, mythical birds from the pre-Islamic Iranian tradition (fig. 41), and a bowl with whirling birds from Nishapur (fig. 95), an imitation of lustre-painted wares imported from Baghdad.

On the left side of the case are ceramic objects with incised decoration from 11th-12th-century Iran. Incising was a common decorative technique in the medieval world, and was widely employed throughout the eastern Mediterranean and as far as Central Asia. Its origins seem to be pre-Islamic, as it is already found on 5th-7th-century Coptic ceramics.

The exhibits fall into two groups:
The first group consists of artefacts decorated with incised birds and spiralling designs outlined in green, which have been attributed to Amol, a small town in the south of the Caspian Sea, where several similar specimens have been discovered (fig. 96).

The second group belongs to the so-called Goran-type, with champlieu and incised decoration. According to a tradition which is unconfirmed by archaeological evidence, these earthenware vessels were made by fire-worshippers in the Garus region of north-western Iran, where pockets of Zoroastrianism survived even after the Arab conquest. However, ceramics with similar champlieu ornamentation have also been found in Syria and along the coast of the eastern Mediterranean, an indication that the type was widely disseminated. Two bowls are particularly interesting: one shows a lioness devouring her prey (probably an ox) (fig. 97), and the other a mythical animal with a lion's body and a human head.