THE ISLAMIC WORLD
FROM THE 12th TO THE 16th CENTURY

This period is dominated by the incursions of Turkish and Mongol nomadic tribes who entered the Islamic world from Central Asia and caused massive devastation. Rule by Seljuk Turks in the 11th century was followed by the Mongol invasions, first in the early 13th century under the leadership of Genghis Khan and then in the late 14th century under Timur (known to the West as Tamerlane). As they gradually converted to Islam and came under the influence of Iranian traditions, the nomad conquerors effected a renewal and propagation of Islamic culture. Despite these major repercussions on the political and artistic scene, the Arab element continued to dominate the Near East and the position of Cairo as capital of the Arab world was strengthened.
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THE ISLAMIC WORLD CIRCA 1300
Iran, Central Asia, Anatolia, Iraq

Great Seljuqs (1038-1194)

Turkish tribes entered the Islamic world from north-east Iran and at first served as mercenaries of the Caliph and other Muslim rulers. In the 11th century the Seljuq Turks became temporary masters of a vast empire stretching from Central Asia to Iraq and Anatolia. Upholders of Sunni orthodoxy, they were proclaimed champions of the Sunni caliphate, which they kept secure from the Shi'ite threat and from Fatimid propaganda. The Caliph of Baghdad bestowed on their leader the honorary title of Sultan (the Arabic word for authority), thus formally acknowledging the cession of sovereignty over much of the Islamic world to rulers of Turkish origin. After the end of the 11th century the Seljuq empire outside Iran fragmented into peripheral local states under Turkoman rulers, who paid only token obedience to the Seljuqs of Iran. This was a peak period of Iranian art, when in architecture and other fields prototypes were created which would endure for centuries.

Seljuqs of Rum (1077-1307)

The defeat of the Byzantines by the Seljuqs at Manzikert in 1071 opened the way for the settlement of nomadic Turkish tribes in Anatolia and the gradual Islamisation of the region. A branch of the Seljuqs, the Seljuqs of Rum (i.e. from the Roman or Byzantine territory of Anatolia) took control and, despite their defeat by the Mongols in 1247, they dominated the region until the early 14th century. Their court at Konya was host to a variety of nations - Armenians, Georgians, Byzantines and Turks - but the official language and the principal cultural trends were Iranian.

Ilkhanids (1256-1353) and Timurids (1370-1506)

The devastating Mongol invasions upset the political scene, and led to the unification of eastern and western Asia under the leadership of Genghis Khan and his descendants. Their western branch, under the Il-Khan (lesser Khan) invaded Iran, Anatolia and Iraq, and the Abbasid caliphate at Baghdad was finally suppressed in 1258.
Yet by the end of the century, the establishment in Iran of the Ilkhanid state and the Islamisation of the Mongols had brought back stability to political life. The "pax Mongolica" allowed goods from the Far East to reach almost as far as the Mediterranean and encouraged artistic interchanges with China.

Around 1370 a new power appeared in Central Asia. Timur was the chief of a Turko-Mongolian nomadic tribe which he succeeded in transforming into a world power. Setting out from Transoxania he conquered Iran, Iraq and Anatolia; his capture of Baghdad deprived the city of the last vestiges of its ancient glory and it became a provincial township. Damascus was sacked and the defeat of the Ottoman Sultan Bayezid I at Ankara in 1402 postponed the capture of Constantinople for several decades. Timur turned eastwards to India but he died before reaching China and achieving his dream of restoring the empire of Genghis Khan. His successors in eastern Iran, the Timurids, were not merely military leaders but also patrons of the arts and letters, especially astronomy, poetry and manuscript illustration. In the 15th century the Timurid court at Herat became a great centre of Iranian culture, the source of models which would be adopted by generations of artists in Iran and Afghanistan, and in Mughal India and Ottoman Turkey.

**Egypt, Syria**

**Ayyubids (1169-1250)**

THE LANDS OF THE FERTILE CRESCENT were reunited under Saladin (ruled 1169-1193), who imposed his domination on Syria, Egypt, Iraq, the Hijaz and the Yemen. Kurdish in origin, and trained in the army of the Turkoman ruler of Mosul, Saladin was the main adversary of the Shiʿite Fatimids and of the Crusaders. In 1187 he captured Jerusalem and reduced the Crusader states to a narrow strip of the Syrian coast, while in Egypt he restored Sunni Islam as the official state religion. After Saladin's death his state fragmented into semi-autonomous hegemonies under the control of various Ayyubid princes who held power in Cairo, Damascus, Aleppo and other peripheral centres.

Despite the political upheavals, this was a period of artistic florescence. Decentralisation of power to small centres was accompanied by a diffusion of patronage among local rulers, their courts and the prosperous city elites. Manuscripts, inlaid metalwork and other minor artworks survive from this period in large numbers; they often contain inscriptions with the name of an Ayyubid or other ruler and are decorated with figural and arabesque ornamentation.
Mamluks (1250-1517)

THE ADVANCE OF THE MONGOLS into Syria and Egypt was halted in 1260 by a military oligarchy, foreign to the local population, who usurped power and dominated the area until Egypt was occupied by the Ottoman Turks in 1517. The Mamluks were originally slaves recruited in the Caucasus and Central Asia to form a military and administrative elite. Under their rule Cairo reemerged as a cosmopolitan metropolis and once again became a centre of international commerce; the Egyptian ports supplied Italian maritime cities with spices and luxury goods which had arrived from India and South-East Asia by way of the Red Sea.

The Sultans and their officials were extravagant patrons of building complexes—mainly religious and philanthropic institutions—through which they vied with each other to promote their public image. Mamluk offices and property were not transferable by inheritance and by endowing charitable institutions they ensured that their wealth remained available to their descendants. The same extravagance is found in the lavish decoration of Qur’ans and minor artworks. The emphasis placed by Mamluk society on hierarchy and social rank was given visual expression in the lengthy inscriptions which celebrate a named or anonymous amir and in the insignia of rank (blazons or emblems) which effectively banish figural ornamentation from court iconography and from secular art generally. Although Egypt was never occupied by the Mongols, the new decorative vocabulary created in Iran under the inspiration of contacts with the Far East infiltrated and influenced Mamluk art.
Tour of Room II

Preminently displayed in the centre of the room is a brass candlestick (Figs. 6 and 112), a fine example of Iraqi metalwork made by the celebrated craftsmen who originated or were trained at Mosul. After the destruction of the city by the Mongols in 1261, they were dispersed throughout Syria and Egypt, but retained the signature of the master (al-Mawlli) on the candlestick as a token of their superior craftsmanship. The candlestick preserved its original silver inlaid and gold decoration almost intact and bears the signature of the craftsman, Muhib bin 'Ubaid Allah al-Sarkari al-Mawlli, and the year AH 717 (1317/18). The dense ornamentation contains human figures, the twelve signs of the zodiac and pairs of birds. The inscription in cursive script gives the titles of an unnamed ruler, possibly the Artuqid Sultan of Mardin, Shams al-Din-Saadet 1132–1384. At some time before 1374 the candlestick came into the possession of Mirjan Aga, the governor of Baghdad, who attempted to erase the human figures from the ornamentation before offering it to the sanctuary of the Prophet at Medina.

On the wall facing the door is a stone mihrab (the niche in the wall of a mosque indicating the direction to Mecca, to which the faithful turn in prayer [Fig. 167]). This mihrab comes from a 12th-century Iranian mosque and is decorated with successive arches, inscriptions and a hanging mosque lamp. The inscription on the larger horseshoe-shaped arch begins with the invocation: "In the name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful", the opening words of each chapter of the Qur'an.
On either side of the door are marble panels from 13th to 16th-century Mamluk buildings (figs. 27 and 105) including sections of a gilded cascade from a fountain. In densely-built medieval Cairo, the facades of buildings were often extremely narrow, but they were ornamented with particular care so that the social status of the owner might not pass unnoticed. The two panels on the right with flat relief decoration date from the late 15th or early 16th century and are inlaid with red and green pigment. One is carved with an arabesque (fig. 19) and the other with a palm tree (fig. 114). This tree was highly prized by the nomad Arab tribes for its wood, its fruit and its shade, and the Qur’ an includes it among the gifts of God to man together with the olive tree, the vine and the pomegranate tree. Next to the panels is the central section of a 15th-century carved wooden ceiling from Egypt, showing traces of colour and gilding.

In the recess alongside is an exhibit from 14th-century Egypt: a double-panelled door inlaid with bone and wood decorated with arabesques and inscriptions (fig. 113). The ornamentation of wooden panels with a geometric pattern of small, inlaid polygonal plaquettes was a practice which originated in the 12th century and served a practical as well as a decorative purpose: the plaquettes were able to absorb the expansion and contraction of the wood resulting from changes in temperature, and they also reduced waste, since wood was sometimes in short supply.

Cases 1 and 2 contain 12th- and early 13th-century Persian ceramics which exemplify the material culture of Iran in the late Seljuk period, when industry and commerce flourished despite the dissolution of the central authority. The variety of decorative techniques is great, ranging from simple monochrome vessels to elaborate lustre-painted vases for the wealthy urban middle class and for the court and high-ranking officials.
tour of room II  CASE 1
CERAMIC WARES FROM IRAN / 12th-early 13th century

On the left of the case are a selection of ceramic objects with relief moulded decoration covered in turquoise glaze. At the back are wall tiles bearing representations of animals, one of which shows a unicorn attacking an elephant (Fig. 115). The impression of the gentle elephant preyed upon by the unicorn, which medieval Islamic texts portray as a fierce and bellicose creature, is a theme often encountered in hunting scenes.

In the same group are two miniature houses, one of which has human figures taking the place of columns (Fig. 116), while the interior of the other depicts a ritual meal. These objects are probably associated with Nowruz, the New Year festival which is celebrated according to the Iranian calendar on the day of the vernal equinox, 21 March. Below are ceramics painted in gold over a turquoise glaze.

The case also contains a large group of lustre-painted ceramics. The use of lustre paint on white clay requires special skills, and its simultaneous appearance in Iran and in Syria in the 12th century is probably connected with the resettlement of Egyptian craftsmen in these areas after the decline of the Fatimid workshops. On the left is a particularly delicate lustre-painted conical bowl with a vegetal design (Fig. 117).

The group on the right includes a bottle with a depiction of a winged horse, a reminiscence of the mythological Pegasus and an astrological symbol according to medieval Arab treatises (Fig. 118), a bowl, bearing representations of birds, and a bowl showing a sumptuously dressed horseman whose head is surrounded by a halo (Fig. 119). In ceramics, as in Islamic manuscripts, a halo may be given to any human figure, and sometimes even to an animal.
Tour of Room II

The statuette of a bearded man with slanting eyes is particularly fascinating (fig. 99). Figures such as this, with Turco-Mongolian features, were also found in manuscript painting after Turkic tribes had gained control of the Islamic world. The statuette has a small aperture in its head and must have been used as a jar for wine or another liquid. Similarly, the figurine of a woman in turquoise glazed clay was used as a jug and has a handle and two apertures, one on the back and one on the forehead.

The recess beyond Case I contains Persian ceramic wall tiles. From the late 12th century, and especially during the 13th, tiles were in regular use in Iran as decor elements on the walls of secular and religious buildings. The large turquoise tile with a relief foliate arabesque is unusual, and comes from the top frieze of a wall (fig. 221). Below it is a composition of star-shaped and cruciform tiles of various dates and provenances (fig. 120).

The central star-shaped tile represents a seated figure typical of late 12th-early 13th-century Kashan ceramics, while the other tiles date from the Mongol period (late 13th-early 14th century). The cruciform turquoise tile portrays a phoenix, the fabulous Chinese bird, painted over in red and embellished with gold leaf in a technique known as ajujndina, from the Persian word for lapis lazuli. Similar wall tiles were found during the excavations of the summer palace of the Ilkhans at Takht-i Sulayman.

Below is a brass tray inlaid with gold and silver standing on a tripod (figs. 109 and 121). The pierced recesses were used to hold earthenware water pitchers. The tray was made in Egypt around 1330 for the Mamluk Sultan al-Malik al-Nasir Muhammad ibn Qalawun (1294-1341) with intervalal, whose name is inscribed in inlaid gold on the round emblems surrounding the central recess.
tour of room II

CASE 2

CERAMIC WARE FROM IRAN | 12th-early 13th century

The main centre of Iranian ceramics was the city of Kashan, the province of a large number of works with inscriptions referring to the makers as "al-Kashani" or "Kashan". Their techniques are recorded in a treatise of 1301 by Abu al-Qasim al-Kashani, a member of the Abu Tahir family, ceramic craftsmen for successive generations, from 1256 to 1327. The fame of the potters of Kashan derived from their development of a white, near-vitrified clay which offered possibilities for moulding and painting comparable to that of Chinese ceramics.

On the left of the case is a group of moulded one- or two-handled flasks and vases decorated with relief vegetal and animal motifs. The turquoise glaze was obtained by the admixture of copper oxides, while the blue glaze contains cobalt (fig. 122). Among the remaining vessels with monochrome glaze is a dish with a lobed rim (fig. 123) reminiscent of Chinese celadon stoneware or porcelain of the Song period (1127-1279), which was imported into the Islamic world and highly prized for the quality and translucency of its clay.

At the extreme right of the case is an octagonal bowl with confronted sphinxes and horsemen holding a wreath (fig. 124). Similar representations of sphinxes can be found in the Achaemenid ruins of Persepolis, while the horsemen with a wreath recall the mounted Great Kings carved in the nearby Sassanian rock sculptures of Naqsh-e Rostam.

The centre of the case contains vessels and sherds painted in the polychrome mini-i technique. The term "mini-i"—Arabic for glaze or enamel—refers to the ornate polychrome decoration painted over the glaze. These ceramics were intended as decorative objects and showpieces, not for functional use. Particularly interesting are a bowl decorated with mythical winged beasts (fig. 124) and a bowl with a representation on the base of an enthroned ruler surrounded by mounted hunters holding a falcon (fig. 98). This potentiates is probably also the figure depicted at different stages of the hunt as he gallops towards a tree on which two harpies sit perched. The group also contains a bowl decorated on the sides with a row of seated figures and on the base with the representation of a horseman (fig. 126). The base is a modern reconstruction when acquired the sides of the bowl were attached to the similarly designed base exhibited nearby, which proved to belong to a different mini-i vessel.