The enchanting story of Aladdin and the Magic Lamp in the monumental opus of Al-Fayd wa-l-Insān (The Arabian Nights) tells us how Aladdin, while rubbing his lamp and uttering some magic words, succeeded to persuade the hidden jinn (spirit, demon) to come out of the magic lamp. Beside the supernatural aspect of performing magic – or making wishes come true – while using the power of hidden spirits, which is clearly expressed in this story, the tale might embody a further idea, namely the phenomenal concept that objects, like living creatures, possess souls or spirits. For the existence of a jinn within an object of daily life like Aladdin’s oil lamp suggests that it is possible that a spirit might exist in each object and that this hidden spirit can be awakened via tactile contact as soon as the magic code of the object is revealed.

Of course this notion of bringing objects to life by freeing the spirits enclosed within them belongs to man’s vast desire to grasp the wonders of the world around him. By the same token, the aspiration of man to decode the language of animals and especially of birds expresses the same aspiration. It is our, the human being’s, desire to communicate with the universe because we hope, so it seems, that other living creatures and even things might reveal to us the hidden secret of creation and provide us with a better understanding of the cosmos or help us control it. Orpheus – so tells us Ovid in his Metamorphoses – knew the language of animals and objects, and was able to charm with his magical voice and the sound of his lute not only mankind, animals and plants but also the entirety of nature and its powers. It is related that, when he sung, trees and rocks were forced to follow him. According to medieval traditions, King Solomon likewise spoke the secret language of animals and also was able to communicate with good and evil spirits. The anecdote of the encounter of Alexander the Great with a marvellous talking tree – the so-called waq waq Tree – is perhaps the best example illustrating both the human desire to discover the wonders of nature and the specific wish of communicating with flora. For it is related that, during his legendary expedition to
the Land of Darkness, namely the very end of the inhabited world, he came upon a tree, the branches of which ended with heads of different animals and human beings. The tree warned Alexander of the futility of invading India and also predicted his near end. This anecdote demonstrates, then, the ability of plants to forestall the future and to inform us of things or events beyond human comprehension.

And yet, in comparison to living creatures and even plants, objects might tell us not only stories involving the present in which we encounter them, but also share stories from distant geographical regions and eras. They may have been made long before we were born and can survive centuries after our death. In other words, unlike animals and plants, which, generally speaking, have a tempo of life similar to ours—they are first born, then grow, and like us die—objects, like any other works made by mankind—be that painting, sculpture or architecture—are their own history. On the one hand, they are made everlasting, if possible, and, on the other hand, always retain and mainly manifest the specific moment in which they were born, namely the moment of their creation. As far as time and memory are concerned, objects tell us stories—that is, they convey history.

The inclination to ‘animate’ objects or to relate to them as if they bear feelings or characteristics like those of a human being, namely the process of anthropomorphism, might be uncovered in the specific language we use to describe artefacts. Most artefacts’ terms refer to specific parts of the human body. We speak about the feet of a table, the arms of a candleabra, the head, neck, shoulders, belly and foot of a bottle, the lips of a bowl, and the mouth of a ewer’s spout. Of course this inclination might also derive from the indisputable and formal relationship which exists between our body and objects. In comparison to the less direct correlation of our body to architecture, painting, and to some extent to sculpture, objects are designed to be used, held or worn by us, and their proportions should therefore correspond to the weight, size and dimensions of our body and its limbs. However, as far as objects are concerned, the extensive use of body terminology to describe them also hants at the symbolic parallels we would like to draw between them and us.

Interesting as this above-mentioned question seems to be, this short study is a preliminary observation on this enchanting issue. It mainly gathers medieval literary sources of metaphorical and mainly poetical nature, all of which demonstrate the wish of the artists to give artefacts voices. In the first section, literary sources are selected, all of which suggest that a particular aesthetic attitude towards the art of the object existed in the medieval Islamic world. In the second part, the visual material evidence is presented aiming at showing the varied and widespread aspects and notions of the Muslim artistic desire to animate objects. The selected examples are presented here as ‘living creatures’ and the inscriptions they bear on their bodies will be particularly placed into focus.

II

Medieval literary sources of the Islamic world clearly demonstrate the great esteem in which art works were held. The Book of Gifts and Rations (Kitab al-hadiyya wa al-tahawwul), a late eleventh-century treatise ascribed to Ibn al-Zubayr, is a treasure house of information about the material culture of the Arabs from the period immediately preceding Islam to the Fatimid era. This manuscript is a unique piece of literature. It is an amazing source on the biographies of famous artefacts kept in different treasuries of Muslim rulers. The author presents the objects in this book as individuals—sometimes even bear personal names—and also tries to trace the adventurous story of their lives. We know, for example, how specific objects, which were sacked by the Arabs from the treasuries of the Sassanian kings, reached the royal court of the Umayyads and later on fell into the hands of the Abbasids. Or, we hear, for example, how objects moved from one court to another and what meaning and importance they gained or lost over the centuries. Even the classification of famous objects in the Book of Gifts and Rations into groups according to their courtly functions or fates clearly emphasizes the author’s notion of considering the object as a storyteller. Thus, the history of Muslim communities is told through artefacts’ accounts.

When compared to similar accounts of treasuries of the medieval Latin West, one is struck by the significant difference in approaching the same matter. Objects are usually listed; their material, if known, is given; and in several cases their function in the treasury is mentioned. It should be noted, however, that one piece of Western medieval writing is not in conformity with this commonly used inventory listing. This is the unique and informative twelfth-century book of Abbot Suger, De Administratione. This book is however only one of its kind.

Ibn al-Zubayr’s book is certainly a lively compilation. It is anecdotal and narrative, and written in such a specific way that the whole stretch of history is brought to life. Although the book does not mention ‘speaking objects’, the idea of recording history by gathering reports and eye-witness accounts via objects is present nonetheless, for it seems as if history is told from the artefacts’ perspective.

Another example of this approach is to be found in the writings of the famous eleventh-century scholar al-Biruni. In his famous book on the Comprehensive Knowledge of Precious Stones (Kitab al-jahadha fi matnaf al-jahadhah), which was written between 1041 and 1049 CE, al-Biruni provides us with a remarkable introduction, in which he admits that he decided to include in his book also stories associated with specific jewels. He says: ‘I shall also try to include everything that I have learnt from the jewellers, although the so-called famous stories of the jewellers are tinged with the fiction of the storytellers and the gossip of the bazaar. This falsehood is of such magnitude as to stun heaven and earth.’ Thus, in each chapter on each different precious stone, a specific section is devoted to stories associated with the relevant stone; this completes typical information concerning the stone’s natural history. These stories set the jewels in their social context and provide us with marvellous biographies of famous precious stones from Antiquity and the medieval world. We are acquainted with the biographies of the famous ruby called al-jabal (the mountain), the splendid pearl called al-yamani (the orphan), a pearl called al-zam (the firm or solid), a huge emerald called al-harir (the sea) on account of its colour, or even of the so-called Table of Solomon, the Golden Tree of the Sassanians, and other fabulous objects.

Reading other medieval Arabic sources, one is amazed by the wide interest in objects and the high aesthetic consciousness of the medieval beholder of artefacts. For example, the following account suggests how sensitive man was to the meanings of the materials that objects were made of. It is related that once a rock-crystal inkwell inlaid with corals was given as a present to the vizier Ibn Hubayra from Baghdad, known as Azwak al-Din (1117–74). According to Ibn Khallikan (1211–82), the best-known author of the monumental Biographical Dictionary Wafiyat al-dhyn wa-anbiya’ al-jadid — some poets who were present at this occasion were asked by Ibn Hubayra to compose on the spot a piece of poetry on this object. One of them recited the following lines:

Your inkind was made of your two days, and these have been mistaken for crystal and for coral. One is your day of peace, which is white and pours forth abundances. The other is your day of war which is red, like red blood.

The ability to read materials and colours as meaningful, or as having a specific meaning, suggests that the specific field which we today call iconography was not only limited in medieval Islam to the meaning of images, but also included the material and colour of objects. For example, Mas’udi (d. 956) in his famous book Meadows of Gold tells us about a ceremony in the royal Abbasid court, in which a necklace was regarded on the account of the colour of its pearls as a symbol for the transfer of power and responsibility. He states:

On the following day (this took place probably on the 12th of Muhammar 251 H, in 856 CE), the new caliph (i.e. al-Mutasim) made his way in a great procession to the Audience Hall, where he received the people’s oath of allegiance. He dressed his brother Mu’ayyad in a robe of honour and placed about his neck a necklace of black pearls and one of white, the first signifying that he was heir presumptive and the second that he was governor of the two holy cities, Mecca and Medina.

But also the tension or rather excitement between form and function, which is perhaps the most important factor contributing to the aesthetic attraction of any artefact, seems to be apparent in medieval Islam, at least in the writings of al-Biruni. In his famous book on mineralogy, he says:

An object that really affords pleasure is that which, despite constant use, still keeps its user avid for obtaining more of it. Such are the pleasures dictated by the senses that, whenever they come across a new object, the senses impinge upon it with delight.

And he even adds:

But (a constant habitation to pleasure) is likely to render the animating spirit dull and, once the senses become disturbed, the animating spirit, being worn out, cannot derive pleasure from these objects.”
The following verses were inscribed on a ewer dated 11th-12th CE, which is now held in the National Museum of Arts of Georgia in Tbilisi. They illustrate the joy of looking at the beauty of an object and, more importantly, the above-mentioned aspect concerning the complete aesthetic experience achieved as soon as form and function are conjugated. The verses read:

My beautiful ever, pleasant and elegant, in the world of today who can find the like? Everyone who sees it says "It is very beautiful". No-one has found its twin because there are no others like it. Glance at the ever it comes to life out of it, and this is living water that flows from it. Each stream which flows from it into the hand gives each hour new pleasure. Glance at the ever, which everyone praises; it is worthy to be of service to such an honoured person as you. Everyone seeing how moisture flows from it is able to say nothing which is not appropriate to it.4

The specific verse "Glance at the ever, a spirit comes to life out of it" suggests that the beholder understands that, like any other quotidian artefact, the entire aesthetic conception of the ewer is accomplished – in other words its beauty is discerned – at the very moment that it fulfills its function: in this case, as water flows out of its spout. The beholder is invited to look at the ever as water flows because "a spirit comes to life out of it." It is true that the use of the word "spirit" clearly relates to water. But it also suggests that the spirit of an object could be revealed as soon as form and function are combined.

A similar concept is to be found in a wine poem, taken from the Divan of Abu Nuwas (753-813), in which a wine vessel is compared to a body, its opening to a wound, and the wine within it to blood. Moreover, as far as the spirits or the souls of objects are concerned, Abu Nuwas describes the empty wine flask as a body without spirit:

Gently, incessantly I extract the 'spirit' from the amphora; from the wounded hollow I draw its blood; until I double up two spirits in one body, and the amphora is left lying there – a body without spirit.6

As far as caskets are concerned, apart from the usual tension between decoration and form, caskets display a particular aesthetic experience. This involves the beholder’s wish to discover their inner parts and contents. Locked caskets appear as silent containers, their secrets hidden within, much like Pandora’s Box. The aesthetic experience in front of a casket is therefore mingled with excitement and curiosity, namely our strong wish to open it in the hope of finding the secrets or treasures held within.

Al-Biruni cites a man called Ismail ibn ‘Ali, who was clearly aware of this aspect of curiosity involving caskets. Ismail ibn ‘Ali said:

... (ike) the sides of the chests which were decorated with variegated patterns. He who fell in love with those patterns thought the chest would contain all kinds of jewels. But only the emergence of air (greeted) the opener after the lock had been pressed open.8

The chest with its locked lid captivated Ismail ibn ‘Ali’s mind. It activated his imagination. He was fascinated by the different decorative patterns of this chest. But as a matter of fact the lavish decoration on the chest’s walls instigated other thoughts in his mind: the hope to find expensive and costly items inside the chest. Thus Ismail ibn ‘Ali’s main interest went through the typical aesthetic experience of locked and closed containers. His joy at looking at the casket’s outer decorated walls was concomitantly mingled with his desire to open it.

It is quite possible that the sensitivity and competence of medi eval Muslims to consider objects as if they were individuals has its roots in wasf literature (literally meaning ‘description’), especially in wasf literature of the ninth century.9 In this century, during the Abbasid period, a new sort of poetry of describing one object as the sole or central subject of a poem started to develop. The most famous Arabic poet, who attributed human characteristics to objects, is al-Marmumi (935-953). In his richly metaphorical poems he compared, for example, a pair of scissors to two inseparable spouses or a basket to a devout servant.9

Likewise the tenth-century poet Abu al-Fath Mahmud (b. Mohammad) b. al-Husayn b. Shahak, known as al-Kushayj, who was born in Ramla in Palestine and spent his life in Mosul and Aleppo, was in the habit of comparing artefacts to human beings and vice versa. In one of his poems he says: “And it seems as if (the inkwell) is a king on his throne or perhaps a sleepy girl on an elevated place.”10

Another poem, cited by the tenth-century author Ibn al-Marzuqah in his book on presents, was composed on the occasion of the presenting of an ebony inkwell decorated with gold. A letter attached to the present contained the following lines:

We send you the mother of fates and gifts; she is of a black origin. She is decorated in yellow; for it is known that yellow clothes fit black people. In her belly stand, without any struggle, some lances; they are sharper than the weapons that one unsheathes in battle.11

In several cases, objects seem to speak and even to fight with each other. An interesting example is to be found in the Fables (Masal Sharif) of Berechiah ben Nationala ha-Nakdan (born, most probably in Burgundia). His book, which was probably written around the end of the twelfth century, or in the first half of the thirteenth century, is clearly based on the famous medieval Arabic version of the animals’ fables, the Kalila wa Dimna.12

Berechiah ha-Nakdan tells us:

Two pots, one of copper and one of earthenware, looked upon one another as they floated on the water. The clay pot envied the copper, for it was clothed in scarlet, and said to her: “How canst thou be proud in thy much praise, for thou art styled polished brass? Though thou glisten like gold, mine is twice thy strength to bear speedily over the face of the water. I can run two miles twice ere thou run a mile. Because of thy ponderous weight thou lovest repose. It is seemly for me to hold dominion over thee, for I am clever and shifty.” The copper pot replied: “Well known is thy shiftness. If thy claim is just, let us essay to proceed together, battle line facing battle line.” And they journeyed as if bound together, joined at their two shoulders. The copper pot went a straight course because of its weight, but the clay pot turned over from its face to its belly because of its lightness, and showed a back side instead of a face, and it went a crooked way. The wind cost it upon the pot of copper, and the waves aborted the wind, and they cracked and shattered the clay pot on the copper.13

The moral of this story is quite obvious and also given by the author of this book: “The parable is for a poor man who strives to overreach the rich. He cannot vie with one stronger than he, and when he vaunts himself over him he is humbled and ousted, for the race is not to the swift.”14 Whether we accept this moral or not, the animation of these two objects and their ability to speak and even fight is a further evidence for the medieval inclination to associate life to objects.

II
Of course, the round body of a vase, the slender neck of a bottle and even its handle or spout immediately recall the main parts of the human body. Conversely, literary sources frequently compare the beauty of a human being to that of a specific object. These sources are to be found already in pre-Islamic times. For example, in a certain qasida (saudatory poem), the beauty of a female breast is compared to an ivory box (hsu’uq al-qibd).15 In another pre-Islamic nasb verse (short prelude of the qasida) the femoral lover is compared to a monk’s lamp which lights up during the night, and her cheeks are oval like metal mirrors.16 Moreover, a usual parable is that which describes the neck of a fair young woman or man as resembling a silver vase.17 For example, al-Jahiz provides us with the following description of a young man: “His neck was like a silver vase (k‘a‘ama ’isaqhuq bihju fiddattu), his foot the tongue of a snake, his eye a mirror and his belly a Coptic garment (qu’lbyudun).”18 And in one of the marvels of Thousand and One Nights, Al’Io yo la-Loa, the beauty of the neck of one of the daughters of the king Qamar al-Zaman is described as resembling a silver jug and her throat as evoking the memory of a mirror.19

Of course, one cannot draw a direct line of interpretation between word and image. But also a clear division between the two is superficial. Moreover, Islamic inscribed artefacts and the shaping of calligraphy into figurative forms suggest a flow of these two types of representation. Bearing this idea in mind, while observing Islamic vessels and their decoration, one might start to unravel why objects were treated as if having the characteristics of a human being. The two exquisite water jugs (eighteenth/early nineteenth century), probably from Sicily, in the Museum of Ethnology in Munich are richly decorated on their bodies as if precious jewels would have affixed to them (fig. 63).20 The pale green late eleventh-century ewer from the David Collection in Copenhagen, however, ‘poses’ in an expressive gesture (fig. 68). Its head, so to speak, is slightly turned back in a particular stance, as if arrogantly opposing someone.21 It is likely that precious vessels were indeed
FIG. 67 A-B
JUGS WITH THEIR BODIES DECORATED IN RELIEF
Sicily (?); 14th - early 15th century

The projecting lower zone of these two, thin-walled water jugs very finely decorated with exquisite geometric patterns appears to be adorned with rich decoration (a). The craftsman stamped his signature ('namul Yalami hilt - "decorative work by [Master] Talamis"), each one clearly visible like a kind of corporate logo - on the lower end of the handle (b).
FIG. 68
PITCHER WITH 'HEAD' TURNED SLIGHTLY BACKWARD
Syria, Iraq or Iran, late 1st century
Early glass work of this kind from the Islamic period was free-blown. Already in Antiquity, the region between Egypt and Iran led in glass production.

Decorated with superb gems, hanging on their necks or attached to their bodies. Examples of such jewelled-decorated objects appear already at the very end of the seventh century in the mosaics of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (fig. 60). Precious vessels are depicted between impressive acanthus scrolls. An amphora with curved handles is decorated with precious stones, such as pearls and rubies; a necklace hangs from the neck of this amphora; and earrings are attached to the upper parts of its handles.28 It must be noted that specific objects which were made to be worn either by woman or man are perfectly designed to fit the human body. They appear therefore as human particles. The best examples are perhaps clothes, shoes, gloves and even hats. The Iranian dervish cap or bonnet (second half of nineteenth century) in the Museum of Ethnology in Munich (fig. 69, cr. 70) with its embroidered inscriptions organized in cartouches appears then, at least metaphorically, as a 'talking head'.24 The inscription in Persian, which is only partly legible, mentions the felt hat and 'crown' of the dervish as well as epigrams referring to Islamic mysticism. Another hand-shaped finial of a Shi'a standard is inscribed with Allah and the names of the 'holy family' and therefore appears as a 'talking sign' (fig. 71).

IV
Indeed, the best evidence for considering objects as human beings is the abundance of inscriptions, which decorate many of them. For these inscriptions, when read aloud, 'give' a voice to the objects, as if the objects speak (cf. also the essay by Behrens-Abouseif in this book). The best example for a speaking object in the Middle Ages is, of course, the book. But, in fact, any artifact bearing an inscription on its body addresses the beholder in its own language.23 The idea of decorating objects with inscriptions, especially those which directly speak to the owner or the beholder in the 'I form, has a long tradition and can be traced back to the ancient period. For example, numerous inscriptions on Greek vases appear as addressing the beholder like: 'I greet you' or 'I belong to so-and-so...'. Later, in the Middle Ages, the typical Latin inscription "I was made by ... (me fecit)" illustrates a similar tradition.25

In medieval Islam, inscriptions frequently appear on portable objects. The inscriptions contain a range of texts. The majority of them include good wishes, Qur'anic quotations and poetry. But there are also numerous inscriptions of historical character. These usually mention the date and place of the pieces' manufacture and also the specific names of the persons involved in the creation of the artefact, like the patron, owner or craftsman. Some of the inscriptions are composed in a way suggesting that the objects actually speak, telling us of their function and merits or professing to us good wishes. Some of them are of a high poetical appeal. It is therefore no less interesting to examine where exactly, namely on which part of the objects, inscriptions appear. The early
FIG. 69
DERVISH 'CROWN' COVERED WITH INSCRIPTIONS
Iran; 1372
The cartouches on this embroidered felt cap, which presumably belonged to a seeker of God of the Khaknas order, contain concepts of dervish life and mystical maxims. Such caps are among the primary insignia of an order.

FIG. 70
DERVISH WITH TALL FELT CAP
This mystic visiting the grave of the poet Hafiz in Shiraz (Iran) wears a cap decorated with inscriptions. The segments are filled with invocations to Hadi, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law and the first Shi'ite Imam.
Abbasid, white-glazed dish in the Museum of Ethnology in Munich bears a Kufic inscription which runs in three short rows at the centre of its inner part (fig. 71). The inscription is painted with a bright inky-blue pigment and is highly stylized. Four stylized plants, or better perhaps leaves, encircle this inscription. These vegetal motifs call the beholder’s attention to the central Arabic inscription and at the same time frame it; the horizontal line at the base of each plant suggests a rectangular frame to the geometrized Kufic inscriptions. In this sense, one may even propose that the firm and angular ductus of this inscription compels us to read it in a specific tone, as if the dish talks to us with a crystal-clear voice, saying: zarala b-sa’dih, ‘zamal Muhammad al-Sa’dhi (“Blessing to its owner – the work of Muhammad al-Sa’dhi”). Moreover, since it is likely that this type of dishes and bowls was in daily use in the Abbasid court, it is possible that the inscription was slowly revealed to its owner, or its beholder, as soon as the food placed within was consumed. Thus, the whole process of reading of this inscription was given a specific sound and rhythm and even the pace of reading was set.

In contrast to this early Abbasid dish, the Kufic inscriptions on the upper inner and outer rims of the so-called Minae Beaker in the Museum of Ethnology Munich, datable to the eleventh century, are written in a rather free and joyful script, as if the object speaks to us at ease and in a nonchalant mood (fig. 73). The fact that they decorate the rims, or one may even say the lips of the beaker, enhances the idea of a speaking object. The inscription appears then as if emerging from the beaker mouth, and, one may even go further and suggest that, the moment we drink out of it, these repetitive Arabic words appear as if murmured and muttered from mouth to mouth. Unfortunately it is difficult to decipher these recurring words. They appear as if repeating the words AIIA, AIII.

The word Allah, which is depicted in a nineteenth-century decorative frame at the very centre of an eight-pointed star from Iran, is extremely stylized and its angular letters are perfectly set within the square shape. In fact, the calligraphic design of the word Allah strongly recalls a script usually found on seals (fig. 74), and the star encompassing the name of God in its core creates a starlike aura around it. The word Allah appears then as an emblem, as if stamped at the centre of this star-shaped mirror. It needs not to be legible because it is identified through the well-known image of the name of God. Thus, this artefact does not necessarily speak the written word out loud, but rather hints at the sealed character of the divine manifestation in a visual form – the image of the word.

The dervish metal rod from Iran, datable between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, is a further variation of the use of script on objects and the textualization of the object (fig. 75). The upper part of this rod is standard is made of letters, which can be read as Ya’ll and Ya’ll Allah (“Oh’Allah” and “Oh Allah”). This artefact is quite remarkable because the Arabic inscription is not painted or inscribed on the object, but rather shapes the object and dictates its specific form. The script freed itself, so to speak, from the surface of the artefact and took a shape, a three-dimensional form.

V

As mentioned above, the best notion of man’s desire to give objects mouths to talk is the use of the ‘f’ form in the inscribed inscriptions decorating these objects. The best example is the famous cylindrical ivory pyxis in the Hispanic Society of America dated 1566 CE and signed by its maker, Khalaf (fig. 76). It bears some poetical verses, which are carved in Kufic script around the base of its domed lid. The inscription addresses the beholder and reads:

The sight I offer is of the finest, the firm breast of a delicate maiden. Beauty has invested me with splendid raiment that makes a display of jewels. I am a receptacle for musk, camphor, and ambrogia.

This verse is highly interesting because this cylindrical box addresses the beholder and calls his attention to look at its beauty. In fact the object tempts the beholder, speaking to him in metaphors, and suggesting to him even visual-erotic pleasure because it resembles “the firm breast of a delicate maiden.” Moreover, the object also informs the beholder of its function. This aspect is in frequent use in medieval Arabic inscriptions. The fact that objects tend to confirm their functions reveals to us how much emphasis was put on the purpose that the artefact was made to fulfill and on the aesthetic experience that involves the object’s visual life. A similar notion could be detected in the following example. A candlestick in the Benaki Museum in Athens, which is signed by its maker – the master Ali, son of Limar, son of Ibrahim al-Shanqari al-Mawalli – in the year 721 H/1321-1322 CE, was once, according to an inscription incised in one of its medallions, endowed to the sanctuary of the Prophet in Medina by Mirjan Aja. It bears the following verses:
I preserve the fire and its constant glow. Dress me in yellow garments.
I am never present in an assembly without giving the night the appearance of day.  

In numerous other cases, objects specially made for private and personal use speak in an expressive, almost vulnerable, tone about their emotions, as if telling us secrets from the private life of their owners. The best examples for this genre are the speaking handkerchiefs. One of the verses embroidered on a handkerchief (mindil), which is recorded in the ḍabb (good conduct and refinement) literature of the historian al-Aynī (1336–1430), proclaims:

I am the mindil of a lover pining.
Consumed by desire, a prisoner of separation.
I was the best of mindils, but
the tears of the lovers have changed me.  

But not only portable and personal objects could speak; sometimes, so it appears, also furniture and even buildings could talk. In one of the medieval sources found in the gazines chamber in the synagogue of Ibn Ezra in Fasut, we hear of a specific inscription which was due to be carved on a wooden bookcase or perhaps embroidered on its curtain. According to Golein, this inscription was written in poor Hebrew strung together by Arabic syntax, and is dated to the eleventh century. It reads at the beginning:

I, the bookcase (speak to you) open me and study whatever you find in me.
I am exalted and esteemed more than any other case because of that which is inside me.
In other cases they keep silver and gold or precious clothing, things that are of no avail and do not save from the flames of hellfire.
But I, the bookcase, keep the tree guarded in Paradise, which belongs to the beloved.
“What has the straw to do with the wheat?” In me he keeps
(two Torahs)
Turn here and contemplate the perfection of her words and say to
her: be (fem.) my confident, brother (m), and kin.
I, the Torah, am of supreme beauty, no blemish is in me.
How many are the pleasures and enjoyments to be found in me.
Every man is seeking three things in life, but cannot obtain them
except through me:
Pleasures and enjoyments, combined with greatness, esteem, and
praise, and escape from all worries and misfortunes.
They are called “my cherished, my dear ones” ...

The various literary and visual sources concerning objects that I
have chosen to discuss in this short study suggest that artefacts
 gained high aesthetic esteem in medieval Islam. They were treated
almost as individuals and were sometimes even compared to
human beings. This probably contributed to the high level of crafts-
manship that was put into the making of these objects and, more
importantly, to their significant role as media of expression: conveying
messages, transmitting and preserving information, stimulating
and perhaps even activating their beholders by recalling ideas,
thoughts, beliefs and feelings.

But, why do we tend to consider objects as having human
shapes and even active qualities such as speaking, thinking and
even loving? It is clear that conferring these qualities of living
organism on artefacts is rooted in our desires or even needs to
render objects into human forms and thus to see ourselves – as if
mirrored – in the objects. We cannot simply talk about objects as
living creatures. It is ludicrous, and we do not really believe that
they are alive. But to solve this issue by inscribing it with the binary
metaphoric-literal system is to simplify this interesting phenom-
menon. I would even say that the creation of a general meta-level for
understanding objects, be it as living creatures or as having magi-
cal qualities (that we are unable to control), should be further dis-
cussed. It is as W. J. T. Mitchell says while speaking on images: “The
life of images seems to be incorrigible metaphor, a metaphor that
we cannot avoid” (pp. 163).

Let me conclude this article with a poem inscribed on the lid of
a Syrian or Egyptian elliptical copper box, which was probably made
in the late Mamluk period and which is kept in the Israel Museum
in Jerusalem. The repetitive inscription reads: “He, who discovers

FIG. 74
STAR WITH THE WORD ALLAH
13th–14th century
The name of God in the centre of the eight-armed star is written in extremely geometric square Kufic.
This inlay work might have formed part of a wall or ceiling covering for a room.
DERVISH STAFF WITH CALLIGRAPHIC CROWN

Iran or Turkey, 18th/19th century

The upper end of this staff is calligraphically shaped as ye `A Icons ("Oh Allah") and ye Allah ("Oh Allah"). It served as the regalia of an Islamic mystic who belonged either to a Shi`ite Sufi order in Iran or the Turkish order of the Bektaşı. Ali himself is honored as a master of calligraphy and is therefore considered the patron saint of calligraphers.
FIG. 74
PYXIS WITH KUFIC INSCRIPTION
Muslinat au-Zahirfi/Andalusia dated 357 H/968 CE
The lower edge of the lid of this famous dated and signed ivory pyxis is decorated with some poetic verses in which the box speaks to the observer and praises its own beauty.