Islamic Art in the Kuwait National Museum
The al-Sabah Collection

Islamic Art in the
Kuwait National Museum

Edited by Marilyn Jenkins

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by Murilyn Jenkins, Manuela Keene, Michael Bates

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Foreword

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate

My interest in the heritage of Islam began when my father sent me to school in Jerusalem where I visited the holy places and learned to appreciate the greatness of their architectural design and the beauty of their decoration. While living there, I also had the opportunity to observe the walls, gates and water system of the Eternal City, all of which testified to the scientific knowledge and the technical skills of the Muslim craftsmen.

My vision of the Islamic past, reinforced by many visits to other historic cities of the world of Islam: Damascus of the Umayyads, Baghdad of the Abbasids, Fatimid Cairo, Saljuq Konya, Fez, Granada, Qayrawan, San’a, Delhi, Bukhara to mention only a few, remained simply a vision, until my wife Hussa, with her enthusiasm and perseverance, encouraged me to translate this vision into reality and to begin collecting Islamic art. From 1975, when I acquired my first pieces, my love for Islamic art continued unabated until I had acquired more than 20,000 objects of various kinds.

My decision, and that of my wife Hussa, to place our collection under the aegis of the Kuwait National Museum was made after consultations and discussions with many colleagues and friends. Once agreement was reached and the building within the Kuwait National Museum complex to house the Islamic collection was decided upon, the date for the opening had to be set. There did not seem to be a more auspicious occasion for the opening of this part of the Museum than the country’s National Day. The resolve shown, particularly by my wife Hussa and by Dr Marilyn Jenkins of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and her colleagues, made it possible to mount this exhibition in spite of the very limited time available. I hope those who visit it will judge it kindly and will pardon us if it is not yet in an ideal form. It is our hope that over the years it will attain a position with the great museums of the world.

The collection touches on every important aspect of the artistic culture of Islam, with the aim to be as comprehensive as possible. It includes manuscripts, medical instruments, works of metal, glass, wood and ivory, and any kind of object which relates to the scientific and practical life of Muslims. Its emphasis is first of all on the spiritual bonds which unite the Muslim peoples and the artifacts which express them – manuscripts of the Qur’an, inscriptions on mosques, mihrabs and qiblas – and second on the common factors which have formed their culture. If there are gaps, the reason is that these objects were not originally collected in order to illustrate a continuous historical line, but were chosen for their beauty or their importance. When I acquired them, it was not my intention to display them publicly.

Yesterday these objects were scattered in Europe and America and other distant parts. Now they are nearer to their places of manufacture, allowing those who live here to see the products
of their great civilisation of the past. It is my hope that they will be viewed and examined by as many people as possible. The collection includes a considerable number of objects which have not yet been published, and the exhibition will give historians and specialists in the history of art opportunities for study and research. Much has been written about various aspects of Islamic civilisation, but there are large areas within the history of the decorative arts still to be investigated. May this collection provide an artistic dictionary by means of which the unique beauty of the arts of the Muslims can be better understood.

This book includes only a selection of the holdings of the Museum’s Islamic collection and we hope with God’s help to publish many more of them in the near future.

In conclusion, I should like to extend my warmest thanks to all those who have helped to arrange and display the collection in its present form and to prepare this book.

Editor’s note

In the winter of 1981 Sheikh Nasser asked me if I would help him create a museum in Kuwait from his collection of Islamic art, a museum he wanted to open on 25 February 1983. With the blessing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the support of its director, Philippe de Montebello, I accepted; and thus began one of the most challenging as well as academically stimulating years of my life. In asking me to direct the work on this superb collection from the numbering, measuring and cataloguing of its objects to their conservation, photography, publication and exhibition, Sheikh Nasser afforded me a unique privilege for which I shall be eternally grateful.

On the occasion of the publication of this book, which is intended both as an introduction to the al-Sabah Collection as well as a commemorative volume marking the opening of the new Museum of Islamic Art in the Kuwait National Museum, I would like to take the opportunity to thank a number of individuals whose contributions are such that they should not remain anonymous. First among these is Sheikha HusaSabah al-Salem al-Sabah whose help and moral support were inestimable. Katie Marsh and Elizabeth Richardson both provided immeasurable assistance in details large and small: Yousra Abdulla Said Awad, Walter Denny, Nobuko Kajitani, David King, Linda Komaroff, Louise W. Mackie, Maun Z. Madina, Yasir H. Safadi, Robert Skelton, Priscilla P. Soucek and Oliver Watson all made themselves readily available when their scholarly advice was sought, and Albert Hourani, Basim Masallam, John O’Neill and Joan A. Speers were most generous with editorial comments.

Marilyn Jenkins
NEW YORK, SEPTEMBER 1982

Nasser Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah
KUWAIT, 1982
Introduction

Sheikh Nasser did not begin collecting Islamic Art with a view towards establishing a museum. Not only is his humility too great to ever have imagined that his acquisitiveness would eventually have resulted in a museum, but his collecting appears to have been born primarily of the desire to bring Islamic objects back to Islamic soil. Now that almost 10000 objects from his collection fill the Museum of Islamic Art of the Kuwait National Museum, I am sure he is more incredulous than anyone.

In slightly less than eight years, a man with a desire to bring back objects created by a particular culture (which is, in fact, his own) within the geographical confines of that culture has managed to do what no other single individual has ever done—create a Museum of Islamic Art. Not restricted to any one period, area or medium, it is the largest comprehensive collection in the Islamic world and ranks with the other great collections of this art in Berlin, Leningrad, London, New York and Paris, each of which is the result of the efforts (often spanning more than a century) of many people.

Sheikh Nasser is an inveterate collector and an intuitive connoisseur with a highly refined taste, trained eye and photographic memory. He has a boundless enthusiasm which sustains him during the sometimes long pursuit of an object, a coolness which stands him in very good stead during its capture and a genuine love for beautiful things in general and Islamic art in particular which is reflected in the manner in which he cares for and lavishes attention on an object once it is his.

He combines this passion for collecting and for the art itself with an essential humility, a magnanimity and a disarming personality notable for an infectious charm, ingenuousness and a delightful sense of humour.

Finally, when a mere pastime becomes a mission with the consequent added demands such a transformation makes on one’s time, the spirit with which the mission is undertaken is strongly affected by the support of those in one’s immediate family. Sheikhna Husa has been a constant inspiration as well as help to her husband throughout his years of collecting.

The history of Islamic art has a unity which is remarkable considering its inherent diversity given its development over a period of 1300 years and its spread from Spain to the borders of China. One of the reasons for this cohesion is to be found in four characteristics of this art: the decorative use of geometric patterns, highly stylised vegetal forms, figural iconography and calligraphy. This unity is, however, not simply a measure of the pervasiveness of four basic characteristics. What is equally contributory is the cyclical repetition of certain processes
throughout thirteen centuries which insures a continuity over such a long time and wide space. Each of the four broad chronological periods into which the objects illustrated here have been divided incorporate most or all of the following: adoption, adaptation, creation, imitation, migration and continuation or revival.

Our knowledge is limited about the art enjoyed by the economically sophisticated and wealthy mercantile aristocracy in the three major Arabian cities of Mecca, Medina and Taif when the Arabs began their conquests in the name of Islam during the second quarter of the seventh century AD. It is clear, however, that whatever form this art took, it appears not to have played an appreciable part in the Muslim cultures which developed later outside the Arabian peninsula.

In the early years of Islam, most of the building styles, architectural decoration, decorative techniques, types and shapes of objects, as well as iconography were adopted from the cultures found in the areas conquered by the Muslims, and it was only gradually that this adoptive process became first adaptive and finally creative. The late Greco-Roman tradition was prevalent on the shores of the Mediterranean at the time of the Arab conquests. Formal modes were added to the naturalism of this tradition by means of the stylised motifs of Sassanian origin which were prevalent in the more eastern areas conquered by the Muslim armies—namely Iraq and Greater Iran.

While all three processes of adoption, adaptation and creation are present during the Early Islamic Period (seventh to tenth century), the first two are the most commonly found.

Geometric patterns were very much a part of the late Greco-Roman tradition. Building on this, Islamic art ultimately developed the decorative possibilities of geometry in the most intensive and imaginative way in all of world art history. Those patterns used during the Early Islamic Period, however, give little indication of the inventiveness which was to characterise this decorative mode starting in the subsequent period. For the most part, Muslim artists of this time seem to have been content to use patterns taken from the tradition they inherited. The geometric interlace design on the carved and painted wood panel (p45) illustrates this adoption quite beautifully.

Vegetal designs were used in a variety of ways both in the Roman/Byzantine world and in pre-Islamic Iran. The progressive abstraction of such motifs during the Early Islamic Period can be followed on three objects in the al-Sabah Collection. The ivory box (p32) bears a quite a faithful rendering of the late Greco-Roman design of an urn sprouting vine scrolls complete with grapes. The decoration on the marble capital (p44), on the other hand, is very much a development from that on the pre-Islamic model. Finally, the tabula ansata on a page from a Qur’an manuscript (p21) bears a vegetal design exhibiting a formalisation known as an ambuscade in which one leaf grows out of the tip of another forming an unending, continuous pattern which seems to have neither a beginning nor an end.

Calligraphy has always been considered the highest art form in the Islamic world and as such has absorbed the efforts and displayed the talents of some of the best of Islam’s artists. The continuous and almost unprecedented number of transformations which Arabic writing has undergone during the Early Islamic Period and the al-Sabah Collection has examples of the early naskh (p18) and western (p14) and eastern (p20) Kufic scripts. The decorative use of calligraphy on objects in various media also began at this time (p52, 29, 42, and 44), that on the textile fragment being an easy example of the often confounding liberties taken with the alphabet for purely decorative purposes.

Perhaps the lustre-painted earthenware bowl (p22) epitomises the artistic creativity of the time better than any other single object illustrated from the period. Used to decorate glass from as early as the middle of the eighth century (p26), the application of the technique of lustre painting to pottery was the single most important contribution made to the ceramic industry in the Early Islamic Period. Its spread to the new medium in ninth-century Iraq was an event which was to make a permanent imprint on the ceramic industry in general and its echo is still being felt in the lustre-painted ware produced in the West today. That the technique as well as particular designs found on Iraqi lustre-painted ware spread to Egypt during this period is witnessed by the bowl (p26).

During the Early Medieval Islamic Period (eleventh to mid thirteenth century), it is the creative process which takes precedence, although adoption and adaptation continue to serve as important cohesive factors.

The decoration on the bottle (p38) as well as the method of its creation, by blowing the blue glass into a two-part mould, illustrate both the adoption of a technique prevalent during the Early Islamic Period and the continuity of an Arabesque design found on objects in various media from the ninth-century Abbasid capital of Samarra. The Egyptian rock crystal chess pieces and bottle (p60 and 61) exhibit closely related designs with a similar Islamic heritage indicating that the motif moved westward during this period as well as to the east.

Another glass technique adopted from the previous period is used to decorate the perfume sprinkler (p53, right). The process of inlaying glass threads in a matrix and combing them to create a pattern originated in pre-Islamic Egypt.

The repousé technique employed to execute the animal decoration on two bronze candlesticks (p70 and 71) and prevalent on Sassanian metal vessels was not commonly used by Islamic metalworkers. They preferred linear designs created by chased or engraving which in general tended to replace the relief designs of pre-Islamic Iranian metalwork. The vegetal and calligraphic decoration on the Egyptian lampstand (p66) is a fine example of chasing, a technique which was also in use during the Early Islamic Period.

Used sparingly earlier, the practice of adding colourful enamels to metalwork through the inlaying of gold, silver and copper attained its zenith during this period. Such work is epitomised here by the octagonal candlestick (p70) which is inlaid with silver and copper and successfully combines vegetal, figural and calligraphic decoration.

The new technique of enamelling and gilding used to decorate glass during this period (p59, left) was to enjoy great popularity during the following period as well.
Experimentation in the field of ceramics led to an important innovation during this period—the rediscovery of Egyptian faience. This man-made as opposed to naturally occurring substance is a mixture of potash, quartz and white clay. It was not long before this white, composite body was being used as a ground for painted designs exhibiting greater line and tonal variety than was possible before. The victory over this medium was thus achieved and the decorative possibilities open to the Muslim potter were now limitless. The graceful ewer (p53) is a masterful example of the potter’s new control over his medium.

Having disappeared from Iraq never to return to the best of our knowledge, lustre painting on pottery continued in Spain as well as in Egypt during this period. It is from the latter country, with the disintegration of the Fatimid dynasty and the rise of artistic patronage under the Turkish Ayyubids and various Turkish groups including the Zengids and the Great Saljuqs, that it most probably moved to Syria (p51) and Iran (p54).

The tendency to experiment, which was to characterise the art of calligraphy throughout its history in the Islamic world, continued in the Early Medieval Islamic Period. This creativeness can be seen in the manner in which the shafts of the letters terminate in palmette leaves in the Qur’ān section (p99) that contains one of the most beautiful examples of eastern Kufic script known. This ingenuity is further evidenced by the repeated wish for يَا (happiness) hidden among the dense foliage on the earthenware plaque (p55).

Figural iconography which was used sparingly in the Early Islamic Period played an important decorative role during the subsequent period, especially under the Fatimids in Egypt and the Great Saljuqs in Iran. The finely drawn head (p50), the veritable zoo on the hunting horn (p63), the colourful Bactrian camels on the bowl (p56) and the zoomorphic handle (p72) (to point out only a few of the many such examples to be seen here) illustrate the importance of this feature at this time. Many of the figurative scenes are vignettes of courtly life providing us with pictures of enthroned rulers giving audience, court musicians and royal pastimes of hunting, polo playing and falconry. Genre scenes also occur, all of which combine to give us an invaluable glimpse of life during the Early Medieval Islamic Period.

Except for the creativity in geometric decoration, the Late Medieval Islamic Period (mid thirteenth to fifteenth century) seems best characterised as one of adoption and adaptation, as well as one marked by a series of international styles created as a result of the displacement of artists after the Mongol invasions and later those of Timur.

The element of adoption can be seen on the lustre-painted pottery (p84) and enamelled glass of the period (p88). One of the manifestations of the process of adaptation at this time was the simplification of earlier traditions, and the gold element (p91) which lacks the grandiloquence so prevalent on the gold jewellery of eleventh-century Egypt and Syria is a good and beautiful example of this. Adaptation also manifested itself during this period in the elaboration and refinement of earlier traditions. This process is particularly evident in the art of miniature painting. The miniature (p101), more in the Timurid than Safavid tradition, provides ample proof of the element of traditionalism in this medium at this time as well.

As regards the four basic characteristics of Islamic art, the preference for figural motifs which was so pronounced in the preceding period now shifts to that for calligraphic designs and elaborate geometric patterns. The interest in calligraphic designs is to be found on almost all forms of art. The preferred script is the kufic, a majuscule cursive style which lends itself very well to the robust and often large objects so prevalent at this time (p99, 95 and 110). The Kufic script, however, was still an important decorative element and can be seen grazing one of the few existing complete Mamluk garments (p105). During the fourteenth, fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, Egypt, under the patronage of the Mamluks, seems to have been the most creative and inventive with geometric patterns. The marble mosaic niche with two such designs (p106) and the carpet (p107) are important examples of the use of this decorative element.

The result of artists being forced or summoned to move their ateliers from one centre to another can be seen in the strong similarity between the Persian dish (p96) and the Syrian alabarello (p81). While the relationship of fourteenth-century Syrian lustre-painted pottery to that of fifteenth-century Spain has not been adequately explained, the vase (p84) and the alabarello (p86) are proof of a connection between the two industries. An international vogue in metalworking techniques and styles is also in evidence during this period with movement originally proceeding from Iran westward to Iraq, Syria and Egypt, but later in the period moving from west to east as well.

When one turns to the Late Islamic Period (sixteenth to eighteenth century), the processes of adoption and adaptation still serve as important cohesive factors unifying the art of different areas within the Islamic world. Rather than simply causing the styles and techniques of one country to be imitated in another, as was seen in the preceding period, the movement of artists at this time led to these styles and techniques being adopted by the newly arrived as well as local artists to suit local taste. This period was one of glorious renaissance but the seeds of decline which had been sown in the Late Medieval Islamic Period began to bear fruit and by the end of this period, Islamic art was for all intents and purposes eunurated.

The Safavid medallion carpet of which the al-Sabah Collection has a magnificent example (p40) presumably grew out of a type current in Iran in the fifteenth century of which no known examples survive but a depiction of which occurs in miniature paintings. It was this type of carpet which influenced the design of the ‘Medallion Ushaks’ of Turkey (p46) and a style of bookbinding current in both countries (p34). The effect of Persian artists being taken to India during the reign of Humayun and to Turkey during that of Selim I is seen in the art of miniature painting. A line example of this cross-fertilisation is the Mughal portrait of a Persian artist (p39).

The tradition of hard stone carving has a long history in India. As is witnessed by the depiction of the indigenous Ashoka tree on the hexagonal centrepiece (p124) and the floral designs on another centrepiece of a magnificent armband (p125) or the fluting of the graduated beads (p31), Mughal artists were capable of delicately carving one of the hardest of stones—the emerald.
The European artisans taken into the royal Mughal workshops as well as European artifacts arriving at the court may have been responsible for the introduction of the art of enamelling into India. The quality of the enamel made by Mughal craftsmen was extremely high (p127) and its production continued throughout the period.

A high point of creativity and refinement during this period was also achieved in the field of ceramics. Some of the finest pottery ever produced in the Islamic world was made between 1490 and 1700 in the Ottoman Turkish city of Iznik (ancient Nicea) (pp16–20). The influence of this important production centre on the ceramic objects made in seventeenth-century Iran appears to have been strong (p114).

By means of a thread with numerous strands, the objects made for the Umayyad caliphs and those made for the Safavid shahs, Ottoman sultans and Mughal emperors are thus inextricably linked over the more than 1000 years which separates them. By using four basic decorative elements and continuously repeating the processes of adoption, adaptation and creation throughout thirteen centuries, the artisans of the Muslim realms caused the remarkable unity inherent in Islamic art to be attained in spite of the great diversity implied in its temporal and geographic expanse.

The collection introduced here is a living collection, one which will be augmented in years to come – its gaps filled, its weak areas strengthened, new masterpieces added. Thus, in time it will be even greater and more comprehensive than it is today. In forming this collection, Sheikh Nasser has greatly enriched the field of Islamic art, and in his decision to place it under the aegis of the Kuwait National Museum he has made an important cultural contribution to the world at large, the Middle East in general and Kuwait in particular.

Marilyn Jenkins
NEW YORK, SEPTEMBER 1982

Early Islamic Period
Double page from a Qur’ān manuscript
Ink on parchment
Probably Arabia (Mecca or Medina), eighth century AD
Height 31.5 cm  LNS 19 C A 4

Two continuous pages, beginning within verse 89 of Chapter V and continuing into verse 52 of Chapter VI

Leaf from a Qur’ān manuscript
Ink, colours and gold on parchment
Probably Tunisia (Qayrawān), first half tenth century AD
Width 30.7 cm  LNS 2 C A 4

Recto begins within verse 49 and continues into verse 51 of Chapter XXIII; verso continues into verse 52
Bowl
Earthenware, glazed and lustre painted
Iraq, ninth century AD
Diameter 29 cm LN919 c

Dish
Earthenware, glazed and lustre painted
Iraq, ninth century AD
Diameter 37 cm LN998 c
Inscribed in three lines
23
Bowl
Earthenware, inglaze painted
Iraq, ninth century AD
Diameter 16.2 cm

Bowl
Earthenware, glazed and lustre painted
Iraq, tenth century AD
Diameter 14.4 cm