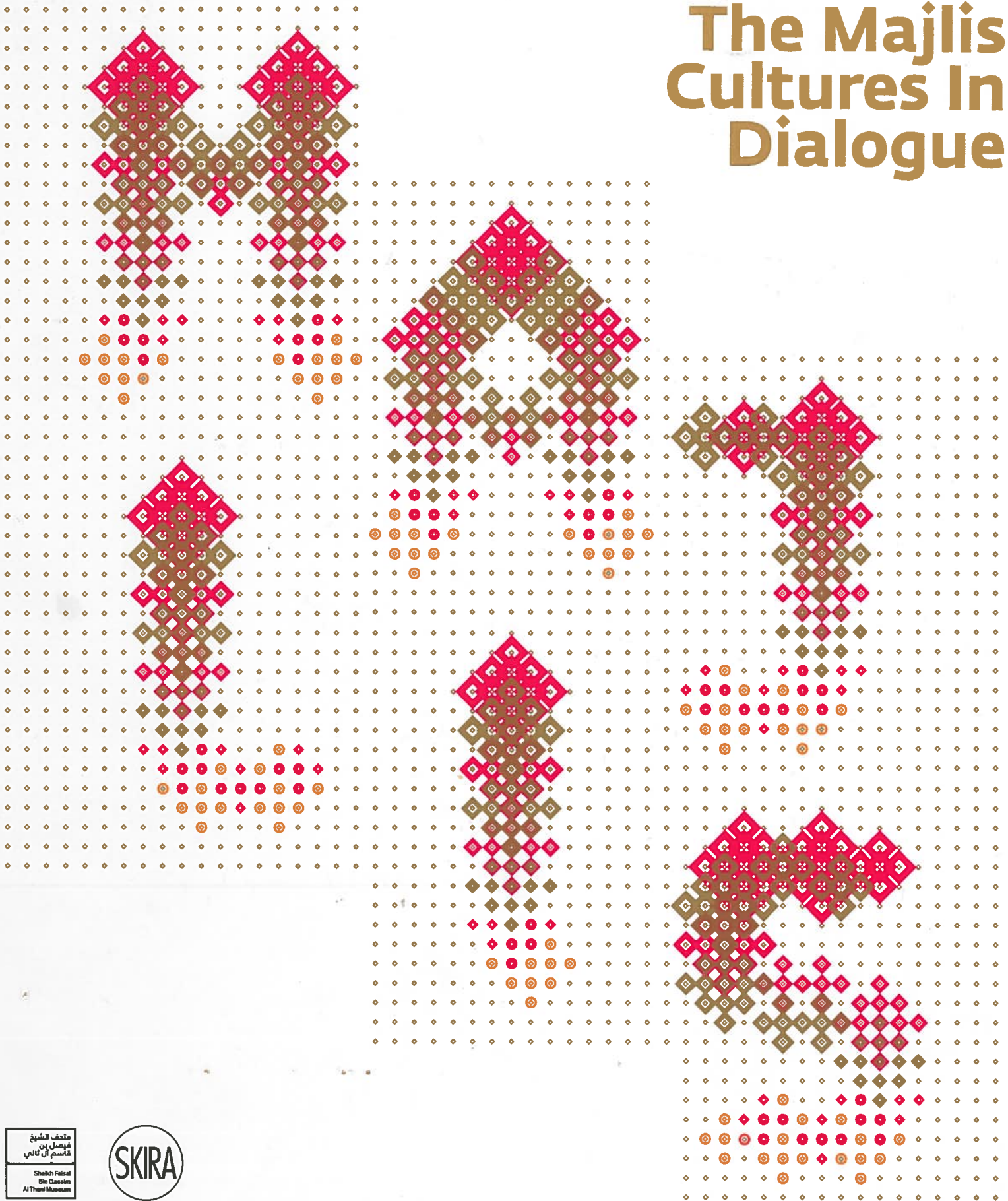


# The Majlis Cultures In Dialogue



**THE MAJLIS**  
**CULTURES IN DIALOGUE**

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Doha Office



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# THE MAJLIS

# CULTURES IN DIALOGUE





This publication is issued in conjunction with the touring exhibition *The Majlis – Cultures in Dialogue* held at several venues in Europe, from September 2018 to December 2020.

# THE MAJLIS CULTURES IN DIALOGUE

## UNDER THE PATRONAGE OF

His Highness Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani,  
*Emir of the State of Qatar*

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Her Excellency Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca,  
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# VISION

**WE ALL SHARE THE SAME PLANET, AND CULTURE IS AN ESSENTIAL TOOL FOR UNDERSTANDING ONE ANOTHER.**

***THE MAJLIS — CULTURES IN DIALOGUE* IS ONLY THE BEGINNING OF A MUCH BIGGER PROJECT TO CONNECT PEOPLE, BELIEFS AND CULTURES BY CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR RESPECTFUL, YET INCISIVE DIALOGUES TO TAKE PLACE.**

**THE GOAL OF *THE MAJLIS — CULTURES IN DIALOGUE* IS TO BECOME A PLATFORM WHERE RELEVANT CULTURAL ASPECTS CAN BE DISCUSSED, AND ORIGINAL PERSPECTIVES CAN BE GENERATED THROUGH COLLECTIVE THINKING. WE AIM TO INITIATE MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS BETWEEN PEOPLE AND CULTURES AND STIMULATE ENRICHED DIALOGUE.**

# FOREWORD

GROWING UP, MY FATHER USED TO TAKE ME TO CULTURAL SITES AND MUSEUMS. IN SO DOING, HE CREATED AN ENVIRONMENT THAT ALLOWED ME TO NURTURE MY PASSION FOR HISTORY AND CULTURAL OBJECTS. AND EVER SINCE I WAS A LITTLE BOY, MY INSTINCT WAS TO COLLECT ANYTHING THAT MIGHT BE OF SIGNIFICANCE TO ME OR MY FAMILY, OR THAT RELATED TO MY OWN HERITAGE. SLOWLY, AS MY IDEAS AND KNOWLEDGE EXPANDED, THE COLLECTION GREW TO INCLUDE ITEMS FROM DIFFERENT CULTURES, GATHERED IN THE HOPE OF PRESERVING THESE OBJECTS WHILE ALSO EDUCATING OTHERS. TOGETHER, THESE EXPERIENCES HAVE INSPIRED ME WITH A PASSION FOR CULTURE, AS WELL AS A STRONG DESIRE TO ENGAGE IN DIALOGUE ABOUT CULTURAL HERITAGE. THIS DRIVE LED ME TO CREATE THE SHEIKH FAISAL BIN QASSIM ALTHANI MUSEUM, AS A VEHICLE FOR SHARING MY COLLECTION WITH THE WORLD.

I believe that museums are more than just places for exhibiting objects: they are cultural centers, with an educational vocation to show the human dimension of historical development through the lens of art. I believe deeply in the mission of the Sheikh Faisal Bin Qassim Al Thani Museum to preserve cultural heritage while also promoting dialogue between different cultures. In my eyes, every object in the collection is important in this regard. For every object offers us an opportunity to learn more about one another: our history, our present and our future.

The exhibition *The Majlis – Cultures in Dialogue* is a key part of the museum's mission. It will showcase a unique collection of artifacts from the collection that reflect the interaction of civilizations in the past, while encouraging dialogue in the present on the basis of our shared values and heritage.

At the same time, *The Majlis – Cultures in Dialogue* aims to enhance the role of museums in fostering mutual understanding between cultures. As such, it actively seeks to make history, culture and tradition living entities that future generations can learn from and draw upon, while also promoting a lasting dialogue in the different countries it visits.

By understanding and embracing heritage, we become aware of the things we have in common, an awareness which in turn inspires a sense of belonging to something much bigger – a sense of identity and unity. It is my hope that by sharing objects that connect peoples with their past, *The Majlis – Cultures in Dialogue* will be both a fitting celebration of this heritage and a catalyst for further dialogue in the future.

**FAISAL BIN QASSIM BIN FAISAL ALTHANI**

Chairman, Sheikh Faisal Bin Qassim Al Thani Museum











# THE MAJLIS

**THE MAJLIS HAS SHAPED ARABIC AND ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION FOR CENTURIES, SERVING AS A CENTER FOR SOCIAL ENCOUNTERS, FOR POLITICAL DEBATES AND DECISIONS AND FOR TEACHING AND DISCUSSION. TECHNICALLY DEFINED AS A "SITTING PLACE," THE MAJLIS HAS IN FACT ALWAYS BEEN MUCH MORE. IT HAS BEEN AN INTEGRAL PART OF ARABIC SOCIETY, THE HEART AND SOUL OF COMMUNITIES, THE SETTING FOR IMPASSIONED DISCUSSIONS, JOYOUS CELEBRATIONS AND HEATED FOOTBALL MATCHES.**

The common *majlis* is a large, carpeted, open space with seating along the walls. Most houses have a *majlis* open to family and friends. Upon entering, it is customary to be welcomed with *gahwa*, Arabic coffee. The *majlis* is a space of relaxation, free from any fixed set of rules, where people can come and go as they please. According to the definition adopted by UNESCO, it is a place that brings people together to "discuss local events and issues, exchange news, receive guests, socialize and be entertained."<sup>1</sup>

Traditionally the *majlis* was a place for men to come together and discuss a range of topics. From the age of eight or nine, young boys would accompany their fathers to the family *majlis*. They would grow up there, listening to stories, learning how and when to speak and, most importantly, absorbing the customs and values of their societies. By the age of fourteen these young men would be capable of functioning as well-spoken leaders in their communities. Today the *majlis* has of course developed, but it still preserves its role as a social institution where people spend their free time interacting with family and friends.

The *majlis* also has a strongly political dimension in Middle Eastern culture. Throughout history it has been used as a public space for discussing and deciding upon laws, regulations and policies. A legislative *majlis* acts as a functioning political system similar to a parliament or council. In the Arabian Gulf, as well as in some neighboring, predominantly Muslim countries, the concept of the *majlis* has developed into overtly political entities, such as the *Majlis Al Shura* in Qatar, a form of consultative council that passes advice from people to ruler. The *majlis* is also an educational space, having always played a large role in transforming children into successful and knowledgeable adults. From a young age, boys would go to a *majlis* with their fathers, uncles or brothers in order to gather with friends, family and other members of the community. During these visits to the *majlis*, the youths learned many things: values, morals, religion, culture and how to be an active, global citizen.

Technology has become an important factor in the evolution of the modern *majlis*. Today, every *majlis* has a TV so men can watch news, sports and movies. Among the younger generation, the *majlis* is a place for video games. Nevertheless, its principal functions are the same today as they have always been, and the *majlis* is still one of the most important institutions in the Arab world for shaping social and political thought. And it has maintained its popularity in the Arabian Gulf, where each tribe or family has a *majlis* uniquely suited to its own taste.

The concept of the *majlis* is at the heart of *The Majlis – Cultures in Dialogue*. Like the *majlis*, the exhibition, with objects from the collection of the Sheikh Faisal Bin Qassim Al Thani Museum carefully selected to illustrate different levels of culture, is a facilitator of dialogue: a dialogue capable of transcending barriers and expanding the horizons of our understanding of other peoples and places.

<sup>1</sup> UNESCO, Decision of the Intergovernmental Committee: 10.COM 10.B.33, November 2015





# CULTURAL DIALOGUE

THE EXHIBITION *THE MAJLIS – CULTURES IN DIALOGUE* AIMS TO PROMOTE TOLERANCE FOR CULTURAL DIVERSITY BY HIGHLIGHTING KEY OBJECTS – ALONG WITH THEIR STORIES – FROM THE SHEIKH FAISAL BIN QASSIM AL THANI MUSEUM COLLECTION.

MUSEUMS ARE ALL ABOUT STORIES. THE OBJECTS THEY CONTAIN HAVE MANY STORIES TO TELL, BOTH FACTUAL AND FICTIONAL, THAT OFFER A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR FUNCTIONS AND MEANINGS. THE GOAL OF THIS EXHIBITION IS TO BRING THESE STORIES TO LIGHT, DRAWING LINKS BETWEEN PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE AND REVEALING THE HUMAN PRESENCE BEHIND EACH OBJECT.

THE SHEIKH FAISAL BIN QASSIM AL THANI MUSEUM HOUSES THE FRUIT OF HUNDREDS OF YEARS OF INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE, BOTH ACROSS THE ARAB WORLD AND BETWEEN EAST AND WEST. THIS INTERACTION PRODUCED OBJECTS OF GREAT BEAUTY AND DEEP FASCINATION, INCLUDING CHINESE QURANS, MOSQUE LAMPS MADE IN VIENNA, PERSIAN CARPETS WITH RUSSIAN TEXTS FEATURING THE VIRGIN MARY, AND MYSTIC ARTIFACTS SHARED FROM AFRICA ACROSS THE ARAB WORLD TO INDIA.

## THE FOUNDER

Born in Doha in 1948, Sheikh Faisal Bin Qassim Al Thani is both a pioneer in the cultural world and one of the Middle East's most influential business leaders. His passion and his dedication to collecting art and artifacts of international significance have been stimulated by his travels. With the opening of his museum in 1998, Sheikh Faisal realized his ambition to give the people of Qatar – and beyond – the opportunity to share his passion and to enjoy his unique and extraordinary collection. He is creating a new heritage for Qatar.

## THE COLLECTION

The diverse and eclectic Sheikh Faisal Bin Qassim Al Thani Museum is the product of decades of dedicated and enthusiastic collecting. The works that it contains originate from four continents and span from the Jurassic through to the early Islamic period and up to the present day. The museum tells not only the story of the Qatari people but also of Sheikh Faisal Bin Qassim Al Thani himself. His intensely personal collection is a journey through space and time, in which Sheikh Faisal invites local and international visitors to participate. The museum is also a valuable resource for scholars, educational institutions and schools, as well as a tourist destination in its own right.

## CULTURES IN DIALOGUE

In a time of profound divides between cultures, it is more important than ever to encourage dialogue about our commonalities, our shared values and history. In so doing we can narrow gaps between different worldviews and create bridges between civilizations, building a sustainably peaceful future.

Cultural diversity is a historical and present-day reality; peaceful coexistence is both desirable and possible. Qatar has been a center of tolerance and diversity for hundreds of years. This exhibition reveals a rich world of shared beliefs and practices that counterbalances today's East-West division, and suggests that the climate of sharing, tolerance and respect that produced these objects remains available to us today.

For *The Majlis – Cultures in Dialogue*, we have chosen objects that bear witness to hundreds of years of intercultural dialogue. The result is significant not so much because of the art-historical value of the artifacts, but of the story they convey: a story of the interaction of civilizations and of the will to engage in cultural dialogue. Qatar has always hosted people from different backgrounds, and its spirit of tolerance and dialogue with others on the basis of shared values has given rise to a splendid heritage.



## THE MAJLIS

At the heart of the exhibition, both physically and conceptually, is the *majlis*, a space of hospitality and dialogue present in every home in the Arabian Gulf. The *majlis* is a place where for hundreds of years, visitors have been hosted as they bring news and exotic gifts from their homelands; where children learn from their elders; where decisions relating to the community – both great and small – are made.

Little known to the rest of the world, the *majlis* is a vital element in the social fabric of the region, reflecting the broader concept of consultative governance and intergenerational knowledge sharing. Personal collections – including the collection of the Sheikh Faisal Bin Qassim Al Thani Museum – were originally displayed in the *majlis*, to be presented to and discussed with family and guests through the narration of stories explaining the personal and historical significance of each object.

## DIFFERENT VIEWS OF THE SAME WORLD

*The Majlis – Cultures in Dialogue* reveals how global perspectives can vary depending on the position of the viewer, demonstrating that while we may all inhabit the same planet, that planet can be both similar and different. For example, the exhibition contains a Persian carpet that functions almost like a kind of dictionary or display panel, with representations of Western figures – some famous, such as Napoleon, and others less so. Such a usage is completely different from what one finds in the West, where carpets are purely decorative and functional objects. Another carpet represents the globe, with Persia and the Middle East at its center – something Western-produced maps never do. We automatically place ourselves at the center of the world.

## CELEBRATING DIALOGUE

Overall, along with its program of conferences and educational activities designed to encourage visitors to respond to what they see and share their own stories, the exhibition aims to stimulate dialogue: a dialogue between East and West, between young and old, between the past and the future.

*The Majlis – Cultures in Dialogue* is about mutual understanding. It is about what we share as human beings, about strengthening bonds between countries and people. It is about cultural heritage, respect and diversity. It is about equality. It is about unity in diversity. It is about peace.

## KEES WIERINGA

Director of the Sheikh Faisal Bin Qassim Al Thani Museum



# OBJECTS THAT TELL STORIES

**THE MAJLIS – CULTURES IN DIALOGUE COMPRISES OBJECTS FROM THE SHEIKH FAISAL BIN QASSIM AL THANI MUSEUM IN QATAR. AS SUCH, IT NECESSARILY REFLECTS THE PERSONAL TASTES AND INTERESTS OF THE MUSEUM'S FOUNDER, SHEIKH FAISAL BIN QASSIM AL THANI. AT THE SAME TIME, THE CLIMATE OF SHARING, TOLERANCE AND RESPECT THAT INSPIRED THE CREATION OF THE COLLECTION – AND THIS BOOK – IS ACCESSIBLE TO EVERYONE.**

These artifacts are a testimony to the beauty that has resulted from centuries of intercultural dialogue, both across the Arabian Peninsula and throughout the rest of the world. The selection covers the full range of the human experience, referencing events from different religions or holy books, relating conceptions of the world and the universe, illustrating serious matters of power and politics and narrating tales of love, war and peace. Many of these stories and motifs will seem familiar, others less so. What unites them all is the dialogue in which they participate: a dialogue between beliefs, values and cultures, capable of promoting peace and tolerance in the world by emphasizing all the things we share as human beings.

The selection begins by exploring the dialogue between different religions. In many instances, this dialogue is facilitated by a set of shared foundations and beliefs. Muslims recognize Moses and Jesus as prophets, while acknowledging Muḥammad as the final prophet who received the fullness of God's revelation in the Quran, the central religious text of Islam. In fact, the Quran references more than fifty people and events also found in the Bible, establishing a connection between Muslims and *ahl al-kitāb* – literally, «People of the Book», namely Jews and Christians. They all believe in one God who sent a series of prophets to teach humanity how to live according to His will. These include Abraham, who plays a fundamental role in the belief systems of all three religions.

*The Majlis – Cultures in Dialogue* presents a number of stories from this tradition, exploring their meanings in the different faiths and cultures while also questioning who commissioned, made and owned the objects on which those stories are based. These include carpets telling the story of the Prophet Joseph, who became a slave in Egypt following a plot by his brothers (FBQ.413), or of Abraham's sacrifice of his beloved son – Isaac in Judaism and Christianity, Ishmael in Islam – whom an angel replaced with a ram at the last instant (FBQ.416).

Another fascinating example is a Persian carpet (FBQ.324) that shows Jesus and the Virgin Mary surmounted by angels with the city of Bethlehem in the background. The scene references the Gospels of Luke and Matthew as well as the Quran, while the very languages employed form a dialogue: the inscription above the pair is written in Russian, and the calligraphy of the carpet frame is in Persian.

*The Majlis – Cultures in Dialogue* further explores the theme of beliefs in a series of objects intended to facilitate religious dialogue between peoples and cultures. These include a copy of the Bible in Arabic, or a Quran whose pages turn from left to right like a European book (FBQ.378.1-2). Another highlight of the selection is a Quran translated into Latin in the seventeenth century (FBQ.364). The text was the result of a research project sponsored by the Vatican in response to the growing scholarly interest in Islam due to the advances made by the Ottoman armies into Europe up until their defeat at the gates of Vienna in 1683. The translation was done by Ludovico Marracci (1612–1700), an Italian orientalist who also translated the Bible into Arabic.

We subsequently delve into the mystical objects and practices that have developed in different places and at various times. Belief in mysticism and magic are not bounded by faith or culture: the desire for health, protection and well-being is common to all people. Devices like the Hand of Fatima (FBQ.358) or the "magic bowl" (FBQ.359 and 362) appear throughout the Middle East and North Africa, and are used by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike for healing, the removal of curses or protection against malicious spirits and the evil eye.



*The Majlis – Cultures in Dialogue* presents three very special artifacts from Sufism, the esoteric branch of Islam: begging bowls or *kashkul(s)*, designed to be used by wandering Sufi beggars as receptacles for food or alms (FBQ.3, 383 and 385). Interestingly, the same type of object appears in a Persian carpet depicting the Hindu Trinity, where it is held by the god Shiva (FBQ.354).

Beliefs can also be a source of history and culture, and *The Majlis – Cultures in Dialogue* explores how different peoples have engaged with the cultural or political history of “the other” in various times and places. Not surprisingly, one approach has been to tell stories – and particularly, love stories. A series of magnificent carpets celebrates the power of romance to bring different peoples together, including the Macedonian king Alexander the Great and the Bactrian princess Roxana (FBQ.334), or the lovers from Nizāmī Ganje’i’s poems based on the pre-Islamic stories *Shirin and Khosrow* and *Layla and Majnūn* (FBQ.369).

Another method involves integrating people or events from foreign cultures into a type of world or universal history. We see this in the Persian carpet representing the German kaiser, Wilhelm II, and his family (FBQ.408), or in another carpet depicting the fifty-one “Great Eminences of the Universe” (FBQ.344). These include figures from both Eastern and Western history, including the name of Caliph ‘Umar Ibn al-Khattab (without image), and images of Jesus, Moses, Confucius, Socrates, Alexander the Great, Columbus and Napoleon.

Each culture has its unique forms and modes of expression, and we conclude by turning our attention to the impact cultural exchange has had on tastes and styles. Islam has been a tremendously important factor in this regard. The early Islamic caliphates occupied a vast geographical area; coupled with Muslim economics and the later expansion of the Ottoman Empire, the Muslim world spread outward from Mecca and stretched from the Atlantic to the Pacific, while influencing the tastes and customs of countless cultures in the region and beyond.

For instance, we see an extraordinary incense burner from China (FBQ.374) bearing a cloisonné design from France with inscriptions designating the *ash-shahāda* (the Muslim confession of faith) as “the best saying.” China has in fact long been a key site for the production of a host of materials relating to Islam, including copies of the Quran (FBQ. 381.1-2), bronze *kashkul(s)* (FBQ.385) or kohl bottles (FBQ.371), whose inscriptions bear witness to the skill of Chinese artisans at imitating Arabic calligraphy.

At the other end of the Eurasian landmass, objects attest to the lasting impact that the Islamic presence in *al-‘Andalus* had on the art and artisanry of the Iberian Peninsula, long after its final reconquest by the Christian armies in 1492. The Moorish decorations produced by Mudéjar artisans in subsequent centuries (e.g. FBQ.361) illustrate a certain nostalgia for a culture that had ceased to exist, while the unique architectural and artistic styles of Islamic Spain are echoed in an eclectic Turkish carpet from the nineteenth century (FBQ.411).

These are just a few of the stories that you will encounter in *The Majlis – Cultures in Dialogue*. We hope to show that, in the end, all these individual narratives comprise a single story: the story of all of us. Every object is an expression of the hopes, fears, dreams and desires that all peoples and cultures share. As such, every object offers a new opportunity for dialogue and for learning, and for understanding and transforming our common heritage into a living entity.

## MOAIN SADEQ, PhD

History & Archaeology  
Qatar University

## JACOB VAN GULIK

Assistant Curator  
Sheikh Faisal Bin Qassim Al Thani Museum



# A CULTURAL BRIDGE

IN THE NAME OF ALLAH THE MERCIFUL

IT IS MY GREAT PLEASURE TO BE A PART OF THIS CLOSE COOPERATION BETWEEN THE SHEIKH FAISAL BIN QASSIM AL THANI MUSEUM, THE UNESCO DOHA OFFICE AND THE QATAR NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SCIENCE. THIS TYPE OF COLLABORATION DEMONSTRATES THE SINCERE WILL AND FIRM DETERMINATION OF THE LEADERSHIP OF THESE ORGANIZATIONS, AND IT IS A PLEASURE TO ALL THAT THIS COOPERATION IS UNDER THE PATRONAGE OF HIS HIGHNESS SHEIKH TAMIM BIN HAMAD AL THANI, EMIR OF THE STATE OF QATAR.

The exhibition *The Majlis – Cultures in Dialogue* will travel to several European countries, showcasing a unique collection that reflects the interplay of civilizations in order to foster intercultural dialogue and a spirit of understanding, harmony and peace among peoples. The tangible, intangible and documentary heritage of all peoples – their artifacts, handicrafts, arts and songs – are central to the existence of a cultured and civilized dialogue among nations. Artifacts contain all sorts of knowledge about the ideas and cultures that nations produce; they tell us stories about social and religious phenomena as well as the customs and traditions that have prevailed in the lives of different people. They are vehicles for humanistic thought, with all its peculiarities and cultural diversity.

There is no doubt that the archaeological and artistic heritage on display in *The Majlis – Cultures in Dialogue* will be a fertile source of enrichment for humankind, helping to promote and sustain diversity and cultural dialogue among all peoples. The exhibition will serve as a cultural bridge to allow individuals to interact in different activities transcending differences and promoting a spirit of tolerance and peace.

The State of Qatar has always taken a great interest in cultural diversity, as well as in intercultural and interfaith dialogue. Qatar believes strongly in the power of diversity to bring peoples closer together, and to promote values of tolerance, peace and security in the world.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks and appreciation to all those who have helped this exhibition achieve its objectives, especially the Sheikh Faisal Bin Qassim Al Thani Museum and the UNESCO Doha Office.

**Dr. HAMDA AL-SULAITI**

Secretary-General of the Qatar National Commission  
for Education, Culture and Science

# A MESSAGE OF TOLERANCE AND PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE

**A COLLECTION OF MORE THAN 600 CARS, FROM THE FIRST GASOLINE-POWERED AUTOMOBILES TO FORMULA 1 RACE CARS; CARPETS SPANNING A VAST RANGE OF STYLES AND PERIODS; OBJECTS REPRESENTING THE JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN FAITHS; ARTIFACTS REVEALING THE ARAB ISLAMIC AND LOCAL BEDOUIN CULTURES IN ALL THEIR SPLENDOR: THESE ARE JUST A FEW HIGHLIGHTS FROM SHEIKH FAISAL BIN QASSIM AL THANI'S COLLECTION IN DOHA, IN THE STATE OF QATAR. IT IS AN ECLECTIC COLLECTION, THE RESULT OF A DECADES-LONG PASSION, BUILT WITH A KNOWLEDGE OF AND APPRECIATION FOR HISTORY. VISITORS ARE INVITED TO EXPLORE THIS COLLECTION IN A LARGE EXHIBITION SPACE THAT HAS GROWN ORGANICALLY WITH ITS CONTENTS OVER TIME.**

Collecting is common among wealthy people in the Gulf. Yet this collection is unique and special. It does not focus on a specific period of history, nor does it represent a specific culture or category of artifacts: it is a mixture of many of these, driven by a passion for beauty and a love for human nature and creativity in all its forms.

This collection offers a wealth of information, in particular about Qatar and the region, and about their relationship to the rest of the world. It also provides educational and cultural opportunities for the public as well as possibilities for engaging and building self-awareness, thus creating an open environment that fosters knowledge, understanding and appreciation for cultural diversity. These benefits inspired the idea of organizing a traveling exhibition of the Sheikh Faisal Bin Qassim Al Thani collection, capable of bringing people together around artifacts and stories in the same way that the *majlis* does in the Gulf region.

Simply put, the *majlis* is a place where people sit together. As a cultural phenomenon, it was inscribed by Qatar on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage

of Humanity in 2015, and defined as a "sitting place where community members gather to discuss local events and issues, exchange news, receive guests, socialize and be entertained." Usually, a *majlis* is a large reception room at the center of a house around which the rest of the building is organized. It is always the site of discussions and decisions, of celebrations and festivities. It is also a place of rest kept open for guests, whether from the family or community, or simply visitors, highlighting the hospitality of the Qatari people and their openness to listening and discussion.

*The Majlis – Cultures in Dialogue* will also be centered around a *majlis*, where guests will be encouraged to sit, to listen to stories and to exchange ideas with other visitors and scholars on what they experience in the displays.

The exhibition is thus more than a showcase of beautiful and precious objects: it is a meeting space to appreciate diversity and to attract diverse audiences. It is an occasion to reflect and to understand just how much common ground has existed – and still exists – between different cultures, and how these commonalities are expressed in art, technology and culture.

Different visitors will have different experiences of the exhibition; the same object will speak to each guest differently, triggering different thoughts and emotions. The *majlis*, a space for encounters and the transmission of knowledge, will provide the scene for capturing and sharing these experiences.

Through its exploration of the past across different themes, this exhibition will demonstrate how societies have always contained a diversity of cultural expressions whose coexistence has made people more tolerant and resilient. It is through contact and dialogue with different cultures that we can learn to know and appreciate each other. As a vehicle for fostering cultural dialogue and mutual understanding, which are core values of UNESCO, *The Majlis – Cultures in Dialogue* offers the world a message of tolerance and peaceful coexistence.

## **Dr. ANNA PAOLINI**

Director - UNESCO Doha Office

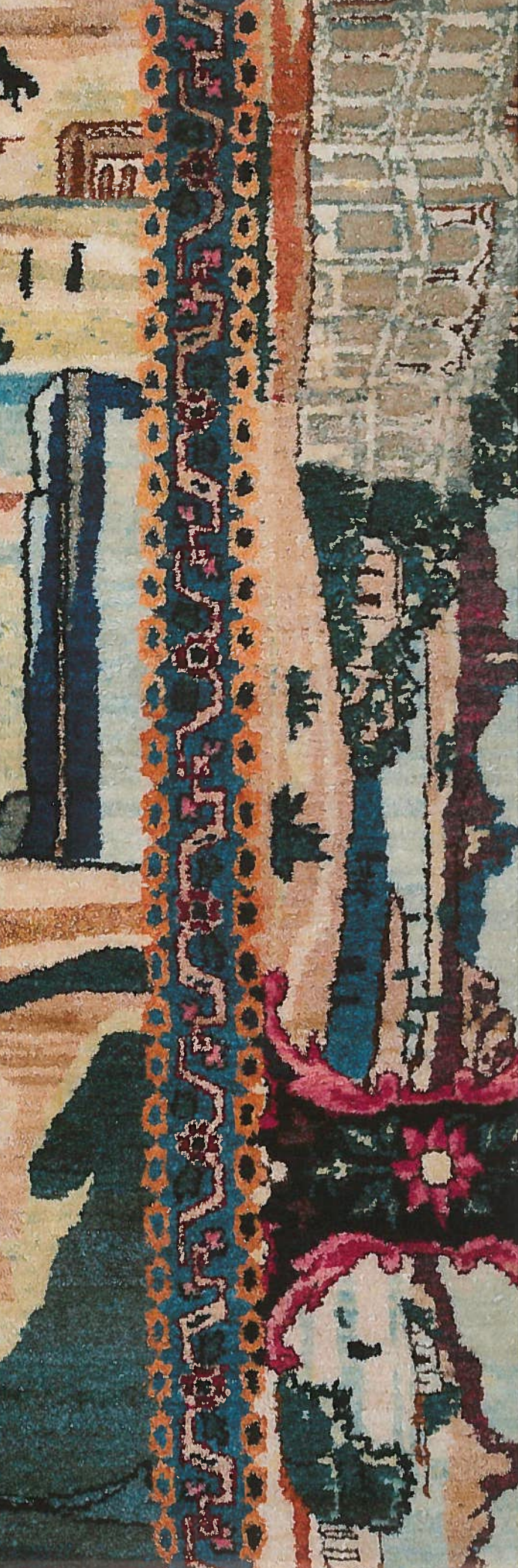
Representative to the countries of the Gulf and Yemen

*[The author is responsible for the choice and the presentation of the facts contained in the publication and for the opinions expressed therein, which are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organization.]*









# A WORD FROM QATAR SHELL

**QATAR SHELL IS HONORED TO BE THE PLATINUM SPONSOR OF THE EXHIBITION *THE MAJLIS – CULTURES IN DIALOGUE*, ORGANIZED BY THE SHEIKH FAISAL BIN QASSIM ALTHANI MUSEUM. THE EXHIBITION WILL SHOWCASE SOME OF THE MUSEUM'S MOST SIGNIFICANT WORKS – OBJECTS THAT TELL STORIES AND INSPIRE CONVERSATION, DEMONSTRATING OUR COMMON AIM OF FOSTERING DIALOGUE AND UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN QATAR, THE ARAB REGION AND THE WORLD.**

Shell has strong ties and deep roots in Qatar. We are helping to enhance the nation's future by delivering positive, impactful benefits through innovative economic, educational and social programs. In so doing, we are contributing to the long-term progress of a sustainable, independent nation.

In a time of profound divides between cultures, activities that promote dialogue about commonalities, shared values and history across peoples are more vital than ever. This exhibition will help to build awareness of Qatar's commitment to promoting outreach, openness and integration through the nation's cultural heritage, while also linking this heritage to those of other peoples and civilizations. Qatar Shell is proud to support such an initiative.

## **ANDREW FAULKNER**

Chairman and Managing Director, Qatar Shell

# BELIEFS IN DIALOGUE

The Quran recognizes the prophets of the Jewish and Christian religions as bearers of God's revelation. Muslims thus consider Jews and Christians to be *ahl kitāb* — literally "People of the Book," partakers in a single religious heritage. This common ancestry has found an echo in art from the earliest times up to the present day, with objects referencing stories familiar to Jews, Christians and Muslims alike: Abraham's sacrifice, the story of Joseph and his brothers, Jesus' birth and many more.

In addition, all religions contain elements of mysticism, magic and asceticism that transcend dogma and lend themselves to intercultural exchange. Examples are the Sufi *kashkūl* (begging bowls) produced in India, Iran and China, each reflecting its place of origin. At the same time, objects like the Hand of Fatima, "magic bowls" or protective caftans illustrate the universal human desire for health, protection and good fortune.

As faiths grow in complexity, the need for sharing and understanding becomes all the more crucial – especially in a multicultural setting. For scripture-based religions, this often entails translation or transposition: a volume of the Quran that reads from left to right, or a Bible written in Arabic. But the dialogue can also take the form of images, as seen in a magnificent Persian carpet that tells the story of the Hindu divinity Shiva, incorporating other elements found in the Christian and Muslim traditions.





**CARPET DEPICTING THE PROPHET ABRAHAM  
ABOUT TO SLAUGHTER HIS SON.**

WOOL — KERMAN, PERSIA

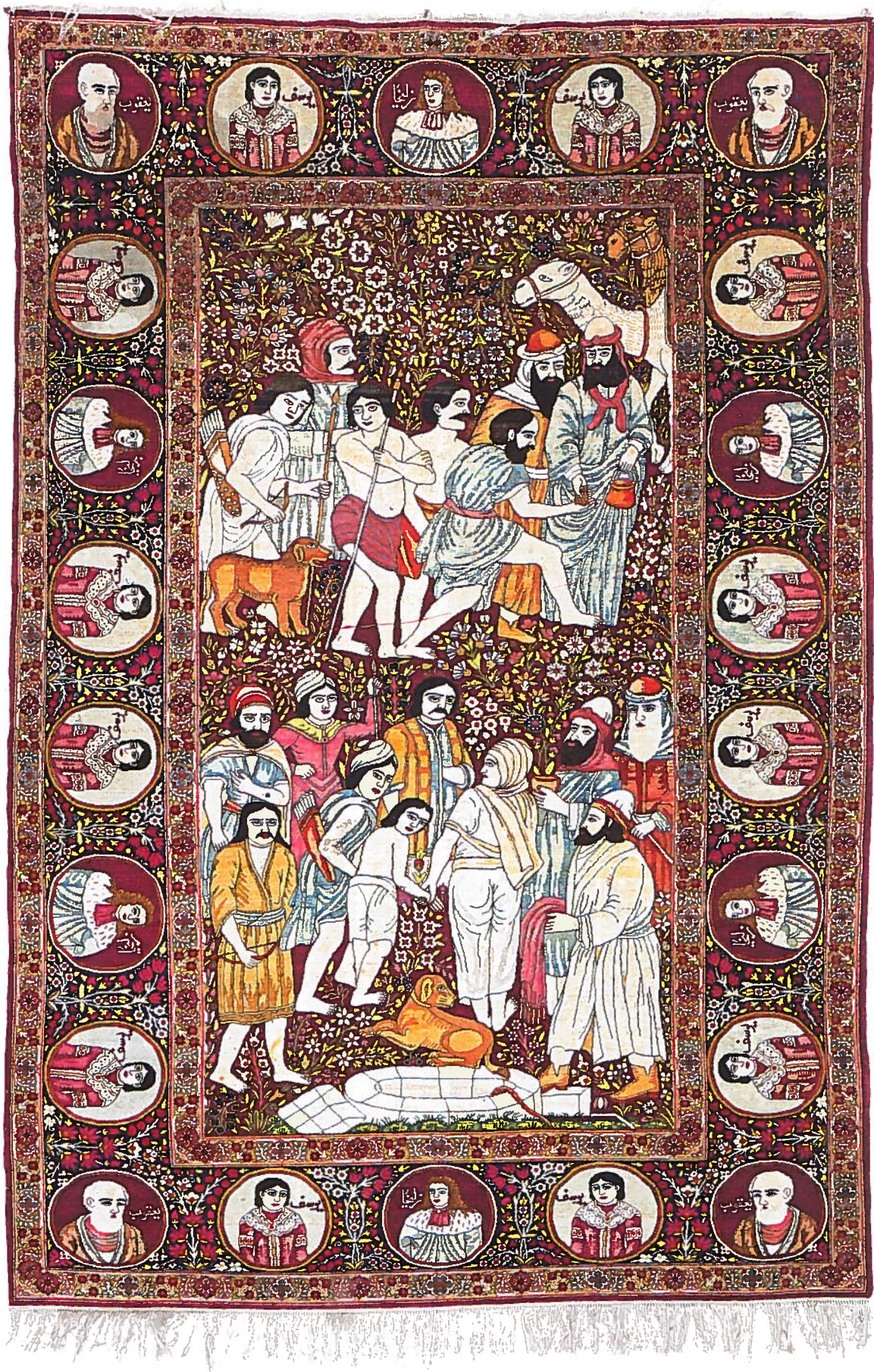
EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY — FBQ.416

The story of Abraham preparing to sacrifice his beloved son is shared by the Jewish and Christian faiths (in which the son is called Isaac) as well as by Islam (in which the son is called Ishmael). This carpet shows God's messenger intervening with a ram to be slaughtered instead of the boy, an act commemorated in the Muslim festival of Eid ('Td al-Aḏḥa).













**CARPET DEPICTING THE STORY  
OF THE PROPHET JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS.**  
LAWAR, PERSIA — 1800-1820 — FBQ.413

The story depicted in this carpet – Joseph, or Yūsuf, sold by his jealous brothers to a passing caravan – is common to the Quran and the Hebrew and Christian Bibles. At the bottom is a reference to the plot of Joseph's brother (Reuben in the Bible) to drop him into a well.

**JEWISH KASHKŪL WITH HEBREW  
AND ARABIC INSCRIPTIONS.**

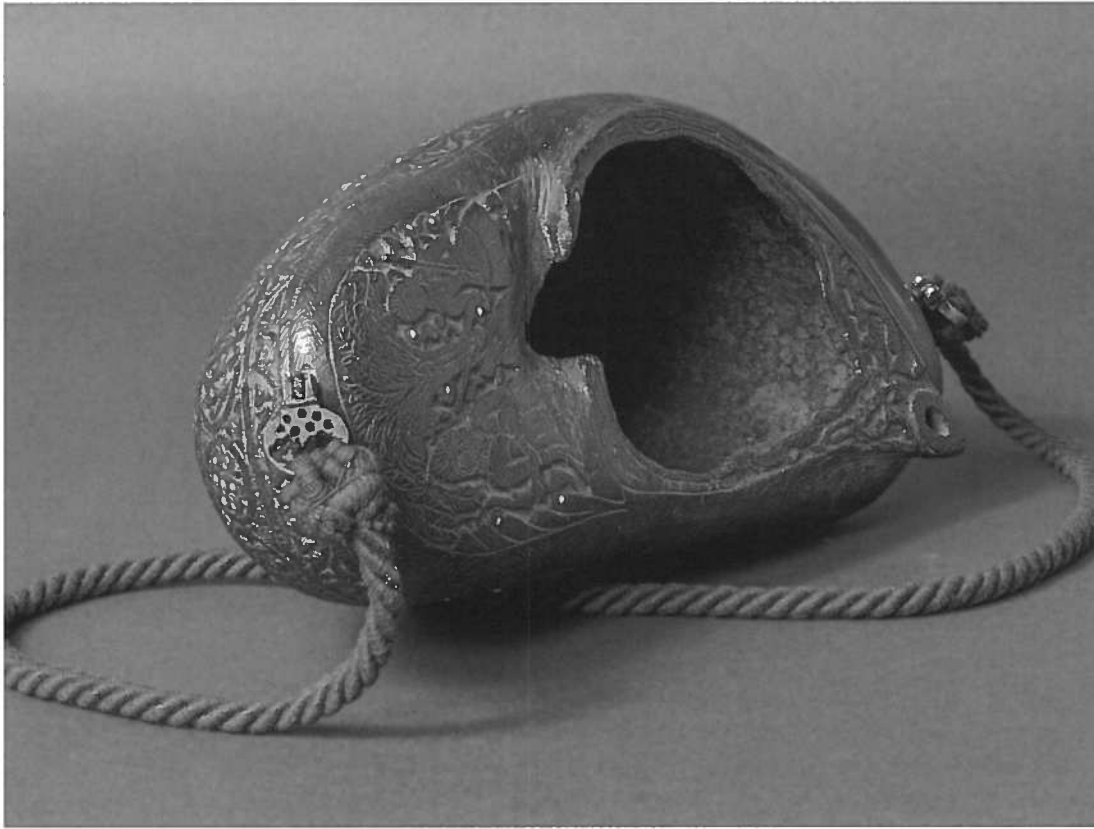
BRONZE INLAID WITH SILVER AND COPPER  
PERSIA OR EGYPT — NINETEENTH CENTURY — FBQ.383

This bronze *kashkūl* or alms bowl was carried on a string or chain by an itinerant Sufi as a receptacle for gifts or food. Originating in Persia and acquired in New York, this piece carries both Arabic and Hebrew writings, and biblical scenes of Adam and Eve and Moses leading his people across the sea.









**BEGGING BOWL (KASHKŪL).**

CARVED FROM HALF OF A SEA COCONUT  
INDIA — NINETEENTH CENTURY — FBQ.3

This Sufi *kashkūl* from India was made from the nut of a sea coconut. It is carved with Quranic inscriptions and scenes of alms-giving.



**KARBALA "MAGIC BOWL" INSCRIBED WITH QURANIC VERSE.**  
 BRONZE — KARBALA, IRAQ  
 NINETEENTH CENTURY — FBQ.362

So-called "magic bowls," inscribed with Quranic verses for treating disease or warding off evil, were common across the Middle East, particularly in Egypt and Syria. The underside of this oval bronze bowl carries a hexagon, with a Muslim prayer for health of body, hearing and sight.



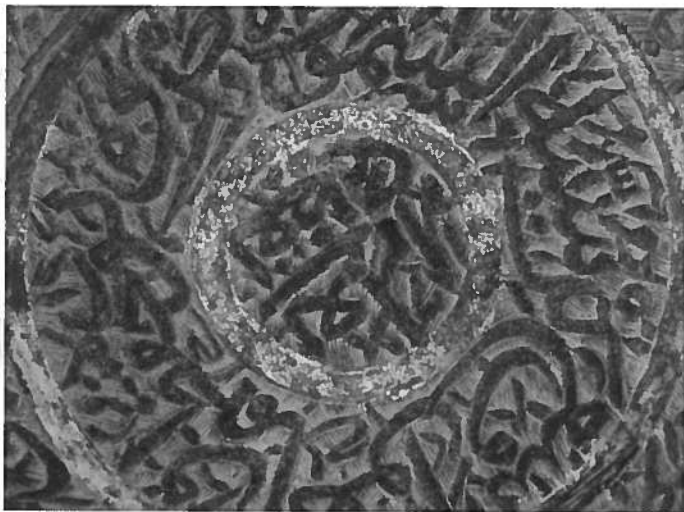












**KARBALA "MAGIC BOWL" WITH QURANIC  
INSCRIPTION (2:255 AYAT AL-KURSĪ).**

BRONZE — KARBALA, IRAQ — FBQ.359

These bowls with Quranic inscriptions, here Ayat al-Kursī (the Verse of Throne, Quran 2:255), were traditionally used to heal the sick, ward off evil magic or even recover lost treasures.





**KHAMSA OR FATIMA HAND WITH EAGLES AND LIZARDS,  
PROBABLY OF JEWISH ORIGIN.**

SILVER — TANGIER (MOROCCO)

NINETEENTH CENTURY — FBQ.358

The Khamisa or Hand of Fatima, a symbol for averting ill-luck, is common across North Africa and in different faiths. This example was probably made by Jewish silversmiths in Tangier, Morocco.









**OTTOMAN CAFTAN WITH QURANIC QUOTATIONS.**  
COTTON — TURKEY — DATE UNKNOWN — FBQ.424

Caftans like this one, covered with multiple quotations from the Quran, were mainly worn under the armor of those going into battle. These caftans were believed to protect the Ottoman sultans from evil, and to have healing powers.





**CARPET, PROBABLY INTENDED AS A MESSAGE TO THE ARMENIAN AND TURKISH COMMUNITIES, WITH ELEMENTS OF BOTH CHRISTIAN AND ISLAMIC CULTURE.**  
 WOOL — KERMAN, PERSIA — 1927 — FBQ.414

A woman, possibly the Virgin Mary, reaches out to a waterfall in a rich landscape of monuments and mountains, bordered by images of mosques, Christian crosses, doves and linked hands. This carpet may carry a message of reconciliation between Armenian and Turkish communities.









**A TRAY DEPICTING SAINT GEORGE KILLING  
THE DRAGON, WITH A CHRISTIAN ARABIC POEM.**

BRONZE — MOSUL, IRAQ

EIGHTEENTH CENTURY — FBQ.377

This bronze tray shows Saint George slaying the dragon, watched by the wife of the Roman Emperor who clasps her hands in prayer by the door of a church. The dramatic scene is circled by a Christian poem in Arabic calligraphy, celebrating the saint's exploits.





# **CARPET DEPICTING JESUS AND THE VIRGIN.**

WOOL — KASHAN, PERSIA

NINETEENTH CENTURY — FBQ.324

Jesus and the Virgin Mary surmounted by angels with the city of Bethlehem in the background. Accompanied by texts in both Russian and Arabic, the scene contains references to the Gospels of Saints Matthew and Luke, as well as to the Quran.







بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم  
والله خلقكم  
ومنكم مريد  
لا يعلم  
الله عليم  
فظكم  
يرفظوا  
ملك







# **QURAN SINGLE PAGES KEPT IN A PORTABLE BOX.**

PAPER AND LEATHER – GRANADA, SPAIN OR NORTH AFRICA  
LATE FIFTEENTH CENTURY – FBQ.378

While Arabic text is read from right to left, the pages of this unique European Quran progress from left to right. It is written in Andalusí script and probably originated in Granada (Spain) or North Africa near the end of the Nasrid dynasty (1492).





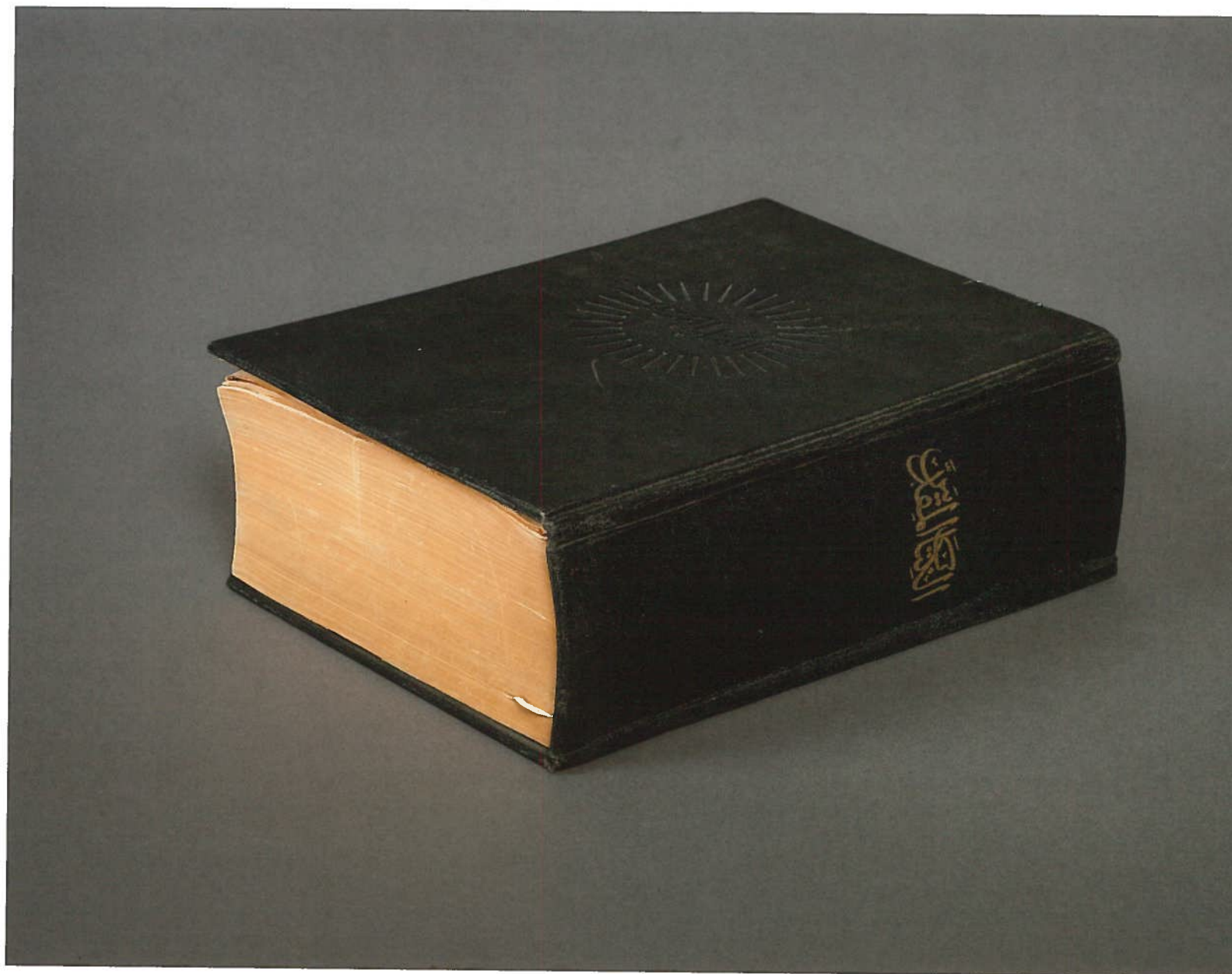


**QURAN SCROLL WITH FLORAL DECORATION.**

JAIPUR, INDIA — SEVENTEENTH CENTURY — FBQ.370

The names of Allāh, Muḥammad, ʿAlī and Fāṭima are entwined in Arabic calligraphy at the head of this scrolled Quran, probably made in Jaipur (India) and designed for traveling.





**BIBLE IN ARABIC, TRANSLATED FROM  
THE HEBREW AND GREEK.**

BEIRUT / NEW YORK

PROBABLY TWENTIETH CENTURY – FBQ.386

This printed Arabic Bible was translated in Beirut, home to the Maronite Christian community, and distributed in New York.







**MULTI-FAITH CARPET DISPLAYING HINDU GODS.**

WOOL — KERMAN, PERSIA

NINETEENTH-TWENTIETH CENTURY — FBQ.354

A multi-faith carpet from Kerman (Persia) displaying Hindu gods, including Shiva, Vishnu, Lakshmi, Brahma and Krishna.





# **CULTURES** **IN DIALOGUE**













**CARPET WITH WORLD MAP SURROUNDED  
BY SCENES FROM THREE STORIES.**

WOOL — KASHAN, PERSIA

NINETEENTH CENTURY — FBQ.369

This Kashan carpet shows a world map surrounded by scenes from two of the most dramatic pre-Islamic romances: *Shirin and Khosrow* (from Persia) and *Layla and Majnun* (from Arabia). The carpet also depicts the story of Prophet Joseph's attempted seduction by the wife of al- 'Aziz (in the Quran) or Potiphar (in the Bible).





**CARPET SHOWING ALEXANDER THE GREAT  
AND PRINCESS ROXANA ENTERTAINED  
BY A DANCER AND MUSICIANS.**

WOOL — KASHAN, PERSIA

NINETEENTH CENTURY — FBQ.334

Alexander the Great and his new bride, Princess Roxana of Bactria, are entertained with music and dance in this Kashan carpet. Romance blossomed between conqueror and conquered after Alexander's capture of the Sogdian Rock.













**CARPET DEPICTING FAMOUS PEOPLE FROM  
VARIOUS REALMS OF THE WORLD.**

WOOL — PERSIA

EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY — FBQ.344

This carpet, probably from Kerman (Persia) represents the fifty-one "Great Eminences of the Universe." Named and numbered, these include Caliph 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab and the other three Rightly Guided Caliphs, as well as Jesus, Moses, Confucius, Socrates, Alexander the Great, Columbus and Napoleon.



**CARPET SHOWING KING  
NĀDIR SHĀH AFSHĀR AND HIS COURT.**  
WOOL — KASHAN, PERSIA  
EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY — FBQ.375



King Nādir Shāh Afshār (ruled 1688–1747), shown in this Kashan carpet, was one of the most powerful rulers in Persian history, with some historians describing him as the “Napoleon of Persia” or the “Second Alexander.” His army invaded western Afghanistan in 1729 and the Mughal Empire in 1739, attacking Delhi. Here, richly dressed members of his court and dramatic hunting scenes speak of the royalty’s wealth and power.





**PORCELAIN PLATE WITH A POLYCHROME SCENE  
OF ROYAL ENTERTAINMENT AND THE NAME  
OF MUHAMMAD SADIQ KHÂN AT THE CENTER.**

CHINESE FAMILLE ROSE

NINETEENTH CENTURY — FBQ.376

This plate was commissioned by Muḥammad Sādiq Khān, whose name appears in the center of a court scene that likely commemorates his father Hossein Qholi Khān Qajar. The latter was appointed governor of Damghan (Persia) by Karim Khān (of the Zand dynasty) in 1769; he was killed in 1777. The scene shows the royal family surrounded by members of their immediate circle as they watch the performance of a duel.





**DOUBLE-SIDED CARPET COMMEMORATING  
THE BATTLE OF KARBALA, WITH DECORATIVE ELEMENTS  
FROM THE ISLAMIC AND CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS.**

WOOL — KERMAN, PERSIA  
1905 — FBQ.392

A unique, richly decorated carpet designed to be seen from both sides, containing Islamic imagery as well as animal and bird symbols from the Christian tradition. It commemorates the Battle of Karbala, which marked the early phase of the schism between Sunni and Shiite Muslims – here represented without bias towards either side.













**HANGING CARPET, MOST LIKELY  
REPRESENTING UNIVERSAL PEACE.**

WOOL — KERMAN, PERSIA

EIGHTEENTH OR NINETEENTH CENTURY — FBQ.409

Intended to be hung on a wall, this carpet most likely represents the concept of universal peace. The two figures at the center, respectively in Western and Eastern dress, probably reference the romance between Macedonian king Alexander the Great and Sogdian princess Roxana. A vase is flanked by a lion and a gazelle, calmly facing each other, while peacocks and four winged angels in Eastern costumes fill the upper part of the scene.





大正五年  
五月  
五日  
德  
官  
印  
信  
部  
官  
印  
信  
部  
官  
印  
信





**INCENSE BURNER WITH ISLAMIC INSCRIPTIONS.**

BRONZE — CHINA

SEVENTEENTH CENTURY — FBQ.7

This Chinese-made bronze tripod incense burner features Islamic inscriptions in Timurid script, including the *ash-shahādah* (the Islamic confession of faith).





**BEGGING BOWL (KASHKŪL) WITH INSCRIPTIONS.**

BRONZE — CHINA

NINETEENTH CENTURY — FBQ.385

This Chinese bronze begging bowl (*kashkūl*) bears inscriptions resembling the Urdu script.





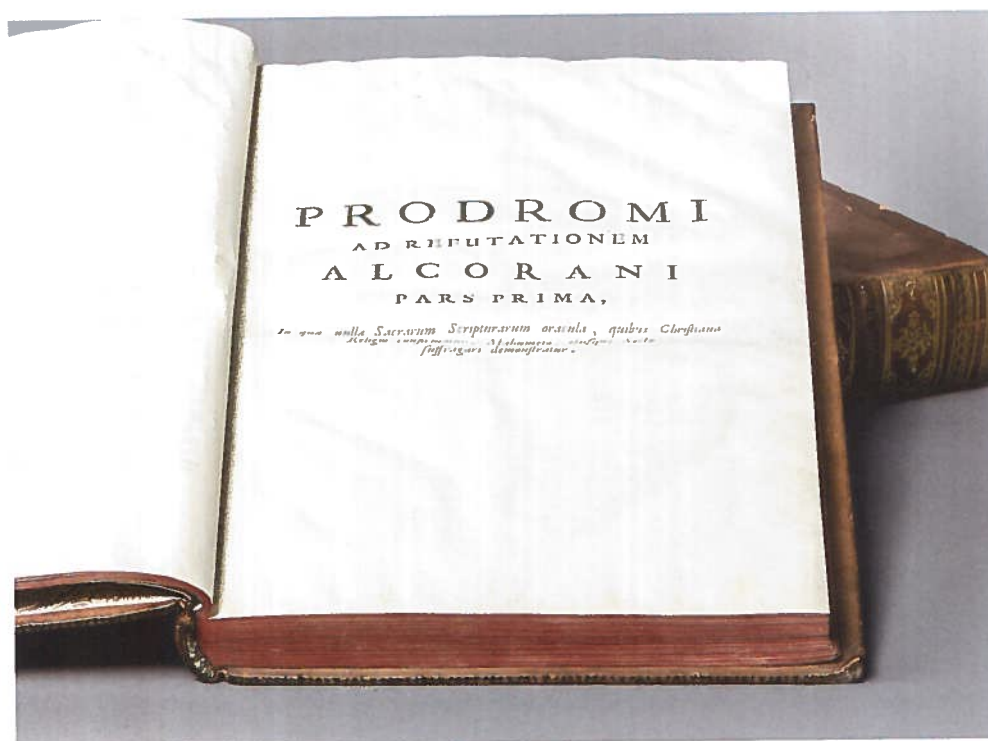
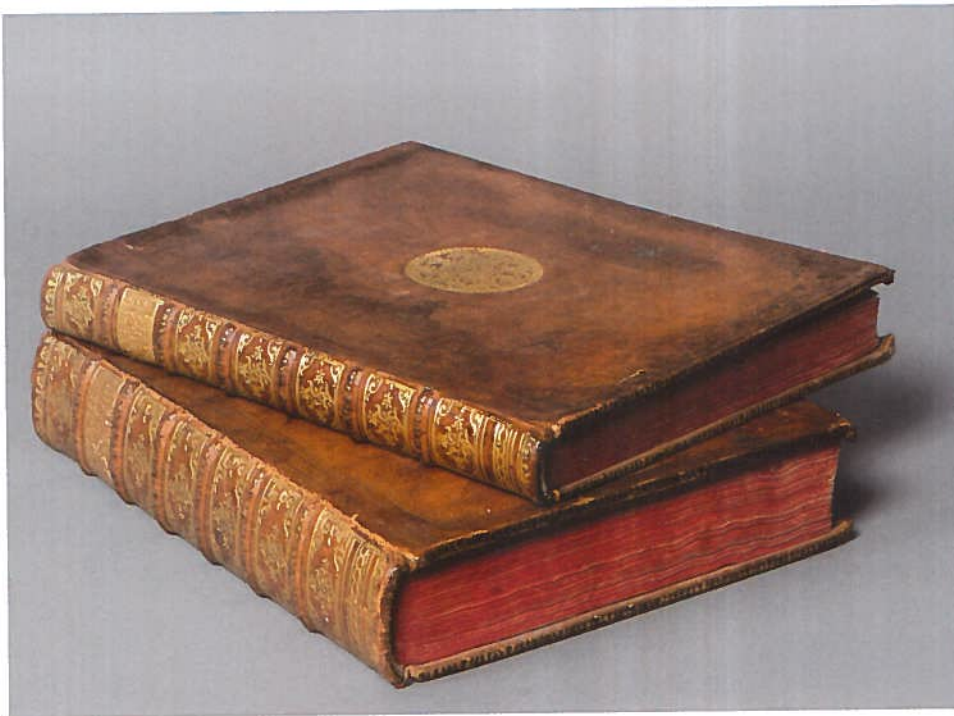
**KOHL BOTTLE WITH ARABIC CALLIGRAPHY.**

BRONZE — CHINA

SEVENTEENTH CENTURY — FBQ.371

The use of kohl as a feminine cosmetic is an ancient tradition in the Middle East. Kohl bottles made of different materials, including ceramics and alabaster, have been found in ancient Egyptian burial sites from the Bronze Age (3200–1200 bc). This bronze kohl bottle is decorated with Arabic calligraphic inscriptions, with the words *bismillāh* ("in the name of Allāh") and *wal-alhamdulillāh* ("praise is due to Allāh alone").





**TWO LATIN VOLUMES: AN INTRODUCTION  
TO AND A LATIN TRANSLATION OF THE QURAN.**  
PRINTED PAPER BOUND IN LEATHER  
PADUA, ITALY — 1698 — FBQ.364

This two-volume Latin Quran is the fruit of a research project supported by the Catholic Church in the seventeenth century in response to the growing interest in Islam that followed the defeat of the Ottoman armies in Vienna in 1683. The first volume contains an introduction to the Quran, and the second a translation of the Arabic text by Ludovico Marracci (1612–1700).





**TWO QURAN VOLUMES. RICE PAPER.**

CHINA — SEVENTEENTH-EIGHTEENTH CENTURY — FBQ.381

Two volumes of the thirty *ajza'* (partitions) of a Quran made in China. The calligraphy script is Timurid Naskhi, demonstrating the skill of Chinese artisans in imitating Arabic calligraphy and gold design.



**SCENE OF A CARAVAN WITH A MAHMAL  
AND SEVERAL HAUDAJ TRAVELING  
FROM CAIRO TO MECCA.**

COPPER PRINT BY PIETER VAN DER AA (1659-1733)  
LEIDEN, THE NETHERLANDS — 1729 — FBQ.406

This copper print made by the Dutch publisher Pieter van der Aa vividly depicts a caravan journey heading to Mecca for *hajj* (the pilgrimage).



قافلة من القاهرة إلى مكة

**CARPET WITH PORTRAITS OF  
KAISER WILHELM II AND FAMILY.**

WOOL — RAVAR, PERSIA  
EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY — FBQ.408

A delightful formal portrait on a Persian carpet of Kaiser Wilhelm II and his family. These personalities are set amid dense floral designs and figures who may be shahs or royal administrators.

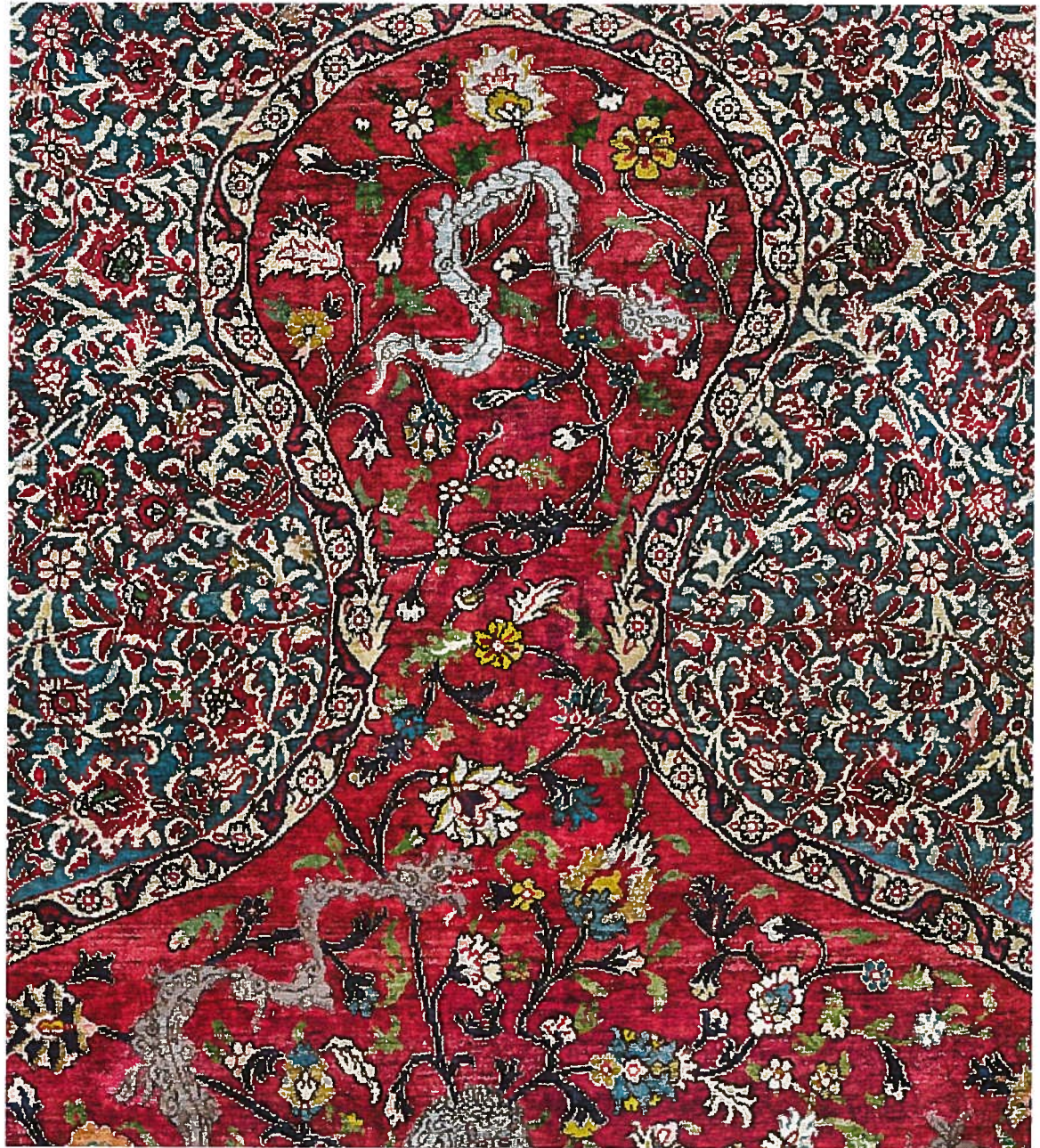












**DRAGON CARPET.**

WOOL — TOPKAPI, TURKEY

NINETEENTH CENTURY — FBQ.411

The principal decorative element in this Turkish carpet is the dragon, a legendary creature commonly found in the folklore of China and East Asia, where it symbolizes potency and strength. Shaped as a prayer niche with a border of rich floral design, the carpet was perhaps inspired by the *mihrāb* (prayer niche) layout of Andalusian mosques.



# STYLES IN DIALOGUE



The boundaries that define styles and tastes are far more fluid than those separating nations and peoples. A host of objects in the exhibition *The Majlis – Cultures in Dialogue* show how Islamic art became entwined with the arts of China and the West over the centuries, transcending differences in faith and culture.

These include bronze and ceramic pieces produced by Chinese artisans possessing a mastery of both cloisonné and Arabic calligraphy; Spanish vases in the Moorish style produced centuries after the end of Muslim rule; Persian Savonnerie carpets; European glass lamps that recall creations of the Mamluk sultanate; and a magnificent rose-water bottle from Britain.

This selection concludes with a stunning example of “aniconism,” the prohibition of images representing living things – and particularly human beings – that has appeared at various times in all three Abrahamic religions. Here, this ancient and cross-cultural trend is manifested in an eighteenth-century Bedouin saddle cover whose stylized horse-like pattern approaches an almost modern degree of abstraction.









**GLAZED AND PAINTED CERAMIC PLATE.**

PERSIA — ELEVENTH CENTURY — FBQ.405

A delicate garden romance occupies the center of this piece, with wistful male and female figures flanking a small tree and surrounded by decorative hearts. The plate is made of natural clay glazed with a white glass slip to imitate Chinese white porcelain.





**CHINESE INCENSE BURNER  
WITH CALLIGRAPHIC INSCRIPTIONS.**

COPPER, CLOISONNÉ DESIGN FROM FRANCE — CHINA  
NINETEENTH CENTURY — FBQ.374

This cloisonné Chinese incense burner, whose metalwork is richly decorated with spreading lilies and lotus flowers, bears elegant calligraphic inscriptions on its two medallions, including the *ash-shahāda* (Muslim declaration of faith).











**COMPLETE QURAN SCROLL WITH PAISLEY PATTERN.**  
JAIPUR, INDIA — SEVENTEENTH CENTURY — FBQ.390

This Quran scroll, intended for the *hajj* (pilgrimage) or other types of travel, carries the entire text of the Quran on fragile paper just 4.5 cm in width. The backing paper is printed with a paisley pattern, named after the Scottish town of Paisley, where the original designs were imported from Kashmir by the British East India Company.





**CARPET MADE IN SAVONNERIE STYLE  
WITH FRENCH FLOWER DESIGN.**

WOVEN WOOL — SENNEH, PERSIA  
NINETEENTH-TWENTIETH CENTURY — FBQ.373

This carpet reflects the rising European influence on Persian artisans as the Qajar dynasty declined in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To fulfill the demands of new markets, designers combined their inherited local decorations with European elements such as this Savonnerie flower pattern.









**GILDED AND ENAMELED GLASS MOSQUE LAMP.**

AUSTRIA — NINETEENTH CENTURY — FBQ.382

The floral decoration and calligraphy of this gilded and enameled mosque lamp recalls the style that flourished during the Mamluk period (1250–1517), while the lamp shape resembles Umayyad vases, themselves inspired by earlier Roman-Byzantine examples.





**MOORISH CERAMIC VASE.**

GLAZED CERAMIC WITH BLUE AND BROWN  
DECORATION ON WHITE — SPAIN  
NINETEENTH CENTURY — FBQ.361

Ceramic vase in the traditional Moorish style, produced in Christian Spain. Combining Eastern and Western elements with Arabic calligraphy in cobalt blue, this vase represents the extent to which the Christian community of Spain was inspired by Islamic art well after 1492.









**MOORISH GLAZED CERAMIC PLATE  
WITH FLORAL MOTIFS AND ARABIC INSCRIPTION.**  
SPAIN — PROBABLY  
SEVENTEENTH-EIGHTEENTH CENTURY — FBQ.368

This Moorish glazed ceramic plate, manufactured in Spain, echoes the style of the Fatimid period in Egypt, while the decorative pine motif is typical of Abbasid pottery and stucco decoration.





**CERAMIC FRAMES DECORATED  
WITH GRAPES AND GRAPE LEAVES.**  
PAINTED CERAMIC — PERSIA  
SEVENTEENTH-NINETEENTH CENTURY — FBQ.418

These two ceramic frames are decorated with floral motifs, vine stems, grapes and yellow and brown leaves. Similar motifs appear in the Abbasid stucco panels of Samarra in Iraq, in Umayyad wall paintings and in mosaic panels found in sacred buildings.









**GLASS LAMP WITH GILDING, RICHLY COLORED ENAMELS AND ARABIC CALLIGRAPHY.**  
PARIS, FRANCE — 1869 — FBQ.391

The gilding and richly colored enamels that decorate this nineteenth-century glass lamp from France are strongly associated with the Mamluk period in Egypt and Syria (1250–1517), while its calligraphy recalls the sultanate of Mamluk Muḥammad Ibn Qalā'ūn (1285–1341).





**PORCELAIN ROSE-WATER BOTTLE.**

STONE PASTE CERAMIC — UNITED KINGDOM  
NINETEENTH CENTURY — FBQ.366

Porcelain bottle used as a container for rose water. The long neck and handles, as well as the upper part of the body, are decorated with tiny gilded floral motifs in the Moorish style.

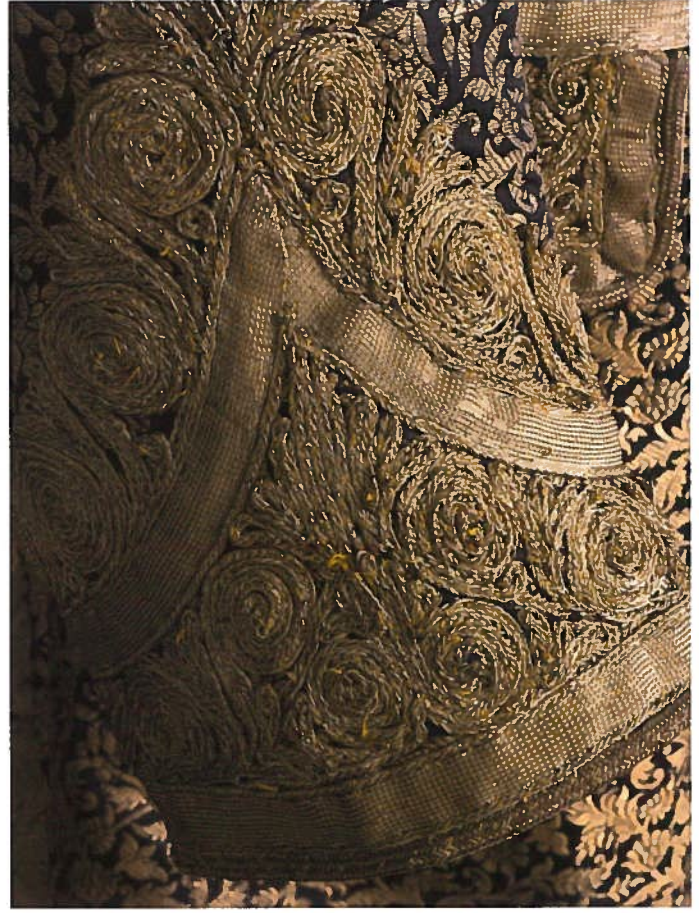












**EMBROIDERED COAT WITH SILK  
AND SILVER-GILDED THREAD.**  
COTTON, SILK AND GILDED EMBROIDERY  
TURKEY – NINETEENTH CENTURY – FBQ.388

With its Chinese silk embroidery and silver threads depicting stylized floral motifs, this coat, destined for a young man of the Ottoman royal family, represents an era of peace and economic development.





**BEDOUIN SADDLE COVER  
WITH STYLIZED HORSE PATTERN.**  
WOOL — SHIRAZ, PERSIA  
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY — FBQ.415

A saddle cover used for the protection and comfort of a rider on horseback. The stylized horse pattern reflects the prohibition of naturalistic images that exists in Islamic art, as well as at different periods in the history of Judaism and Christianity.







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**THE MAJLIS — CULTURES IN DIALOGUE IS COMPRISED OF OBJECTS THAT TELL STORIES. STORIES ABOUT A LONG HISTORY OF EXCHANGES AND DIALOGUE IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA AND BEYOND. STORIES THAT ONE MIGHT HEAR IN A MAJLIS, THE SPACE PRESENT IN EVERY ARAB HOME WHERE PEOPLE GATHER TO TALK AND SOCIALIZE. STORIES THAT RECALL THE MUTUAL — AND OFTEN FORGOTTEN — INFLUENCES BETWEEN THE ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION, EUROPE, INDIA AND THE FAR EAST. STORIES AT THE CORE OF AN AMBITIOUS PROJECT INITIATED BY THE SHEIKH FAISAL BIN QASSIM AL THANI MUSEUM: A MULTIFACETED FORUM FOR RESPECTFUL YET INCISIVE DIALOGUE THAT CONNECTS PEOPLE, BELIEFS AND CULTURES.**



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