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Exhibition Review of "Cosmophilia: Islamic Art from the David Collection, Copenhagen"

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COSMOPHILIA: ISLAMIC
ART FROM THE DAVID
COLLECTION, COPENHAGEN

ALFRED AND DAVID SMART
MUSEUM OF ART
UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
FEBRUARY 1–MAY 20, 2007

THIS EXHIBITION WAS
organized by the Isabella V.
McMullen Museum of Art at

Boston College. It is accompanied by a catalogue of the same title published in 2006 by Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, who also served as curators, selecting objects in collaboration with the David Collection.

The exhibition contains more than 100 outstanding objects of Islamic art and includes more than 20 significant textiles, which represent diverse geographic origins (Yemen, Spain, India, Egypt, Central Asia, Turkey and Iran); with dates ranging from the 7th through the 19th centuries. Linen, cotton, wool and silk, traditional textile materials, are all present, as are pashmina and gilt yarns of several varieties.

Craftsmanship, quality of materials, designs and patterns distinguish this rich group of textiles, representing many different textile technologies. Double interlocked twill tapestry characterizes the structure of an early end fragment of an elegantly designed shawl from 17th-century Kashmir (no. 101). An embroidered Arabic inscription embellishes plain weave cotton with warp-resist patterning from 10th-century Yemen (no. 28). Compound weave structures, each having more than two sets of elements (warps and wefts), occur in several techniques from Iran: an inscribed 18th century tomb cover identified as taqueté (no. 24); and a fragment with floral pattern identified as samite (no. 73). From Central Asia, a fragmentary panel with paired birds and animals in roundels is attributed to the Mongol period, dated to the first half of the 14th century and identified as lampas (no. 12). An earlier lampas with a complicated pattern of hexagons and equilateral triangles is attributed to the 13th century (no. 63). A late 14th- or 15th-century fragmentary textile from Spain patterned with stripes and floral and epigraphic designs (no. 109) finds parallels in several museum collections including that of The Textile Museum in Washington.

Weft-faced plain weave with discontinuous wefts (tapestry) is represented by a unique 14th-century roundel showing an enthroned ruler flanked by two courtiers in Persian and Mongol dress (no. 3); and a silk and linen turban cover (no. 80), possibly misidentified as embroidery.

Three outstanding classical carpets and a carpet fragment are executed in pile, showing their many colors and designs carried by supplementary weft yarn segments wrapped around pairs of warps: (no. 65 from Iran, 17th century; no. 55 from Egypt in the late Mamluk period; no. 83 from India, first half of the 18th century; and no. 11 from northern India at the turn of the 17th century). Although technologically simple, these carpets present the most complicated designs manipulated to form intricate patterns through counted and repeated sequences of knots in the central field and in the borders.

At the opposite end of the technological spectrum, four examples of velvet represent the most complex of pre-industrial weave structures, created using looms outfitted with a pattern harness and a mechanism that allowed differential warp tension: two 17th-century figural fragments from Safavid Iran (no. 6) and Iran or India (no. 1); and one from Ottoman Turkey in the 16th century (no. 45).

Of the remaining textiles in this exhibition, several deserve notice. Two complete panels are embroidered with stylized floral designs (no. 67, from India, and no. 58, from the Caucasus). One intriguing item is a pieced textile assembled from striped satin—technologically relatively simple once the loom is dressed—arranged by cutting and sewing to form a radial design with six-fold reflectional symmetry.

The exhibition is organized around five themes, all designed to explore the subject, *Cosmophilia*, “love of ornament.” Why a Greek term was selected

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for the title of this exhibition is not entirely clear, unless it is indicative of, or a reflection upon, the unfortunate state of our current attitudes towards Islam. The themes are categorized by subjects represented—figures, writing, geometry, vegetation and the Arabesque, and a fifth category called “hybrids.”

Textiles are included in every section. In addition to textile objects, there are elaborate representations of textiles in other media—garments depicted on figures in ceramics, on metalwork, and in book illustrations. And, if one looks carefully and critically, the principles of designs manipulated to form patterns in all media, while visually similar to those in the textiles, are ever so much simpler to achieve! The textile technologies used for the reproduction of designs to form patterns are incomparable and thoroughly ingenious!

— Carol Bier

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