

Spiritual Revival

Islamic Art of the 19th Century from The Nasser D Khalili Collection



TEXT BY RUDOLF ABRAHAM
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTOPHER PHILLIPS
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The Nasser D Khalili Collection is exceptional in that it contains not only outstanding examples of Islamic art from the early and Medieval periods, but also numerous fine pieces from the 19th and early 20th centuries - an area which collections often miss.



The history of Islamic art during the 19th century is marked by the introduction of numerous ideas from European art and architecture, amid an era of modernisation and reform. Nevertheless, it remains a period of remarkable endurance and vitality, as many fine examples of Islamic art from the 19th and 20th centuries clearly show, and is also remembered as a period of revivalism, in which styles and techniques from earlier centuries were resurrected.

Increased trade and contact with Europe from the 17th century onwards unquestionably led to a gradual change in taste by the Muslim courts of the Near and the Far East. In particular, the drives towards modernisation and reform around the turn of the 19th century (spearheaded by rulers such as the Ottoman sultans Selim III and Mahmud II, as well as the governor of Egypt Muhammad 'Ali), in turn influenced the Ottomans in Anatolia and the central Islamic lands, the Safavids, and later the Qajars in Iran and the Mughals in India.

In the arts this influence is discernable by the increased interest in portraiture, the appearance of European subjects and costume in miniatures and other painting genres, and the introduction of new techniques such as oil painting. It can also be detected in a passion for pocketwatches and other timepieces (mirrored in the construction of clocktowers in numerous cities across Ottoman Anatolia), and a predilection for medals and medallions.

In architecture this same influence was reflected in the appearance of Neo-Classical and rolling Baroque façades and coinage in the introduction of paper money. This European influence was hardly surprising - by circa 1870 there were approximately 70,000 Europeans in Egypt alone; nevertheless, it

Facing page: Portrait miniature of the Qajar ruler, Fath'ali Shah, signed Ghulam Khanah-zad Baqir. Iran. Early 19th century. Gold sheet, painted with opaque and translucent enamels. 6.2 x 4.4 cm. © The Nour Foundation.

Above: Panel from the Sitarah of the Ka'baa. Egypt, Cairo, 19th century. Black satin, embroidered with silver-gilt thread over padding of pasteboard and yellow cotton thread. 233 x 85 cm. © The Nour Foundation.

was remarkably pervasive. For example, Islamic rulers not only employed European generals and mercenaries to train their troops in the methods of modern, Western warfare and the use of firearms, but they also felt the need to adopt European-style uniforms and military drill.

The introduction of photography made a considerable impact on the Islamic art of the 19th century. Photographic studios were established in Istanbul and Tehran, as both Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876-1909) and Nasir Al-Din Shah (1848-96) took a great interest in photography. As well as the increased level of realism brought to portraiture, together with changes in style and composition, photography also played an important ethnographical role in documenting local peoples and costumes. For example, 'The People of India' published in eight volumes between 1868 and 1875, contained a total of some 468 plates.

As had been the case in many instances throughout the history of Islamic art, Muslim artists were often quick to adapt 'foreign' elements into styles that remained distinctly Islamic. For example, in 18th- and 19th-century India, a square-shaped glass *hookah* base became popular, the form of which was derived from a type of Dutch gin bottle. Initially exported to India, but later manufactured there, they were decorated in gilt and enamel with figures and flowers in the style of Indian miniature paintings.

Visits by Muslim rulers to Europe were not uncommon - Abdülaziz (1861-76) was the first Ottoman sultan to visit Western Europe in 1861, while the Qajar ruler Nasir Al-Din Shah (1848-96) first visited Europe in 1873. Some studied there, such as the Egyptian Khedive



Tall flask, copied from an illustration in Collinot and Beaumont's *Ornements de la Perse* (published Paris, 1883), which was itself copied from an early 14th-century enamelled flask acquired in Paris during the 19th century by Baron Rothschild. Probably from the factory of J & L Lobmeyr, Bohemia, later 19th century. Heavy ruby glass with very few bubbles, blown and tooled, with enamelled decoration and gilding. Height 50 cm. © The Nour Foundation.

Abbas Hilmi II who studied in Vienna. A number of Muslim (and Christian) artists and architects from Islamic lands also studied in Europe, including members of the Balyan family of architects from Istanbul. Furthermore, technical colleges and art schools were modelled upon those in Europe. A large number of European staff brought a further influx of Western ideas, such as at Dar Al-Funun, which opened in Tehran in 1851, and the Sanayi-i Nefise Mektubi (Imperial Academy of Fine Arts), founded in Istanbul in 1883.

For their own part, Europe became equally fascinated with the 'Orient'. Increased travel to the Middle East and the extension of the classical Grand Tour to include North Africa and the Levant led to a great interest in these regions' past and an increased demand for antiquities by museums and private collectors. Numerous European artists, including Eugene Delacroix, William Morris and Henri Matisse (to name but a few), were influenced by Islamic art, while a profusion of (decidedly eclectic) 'Oriental' motifs appeared in European architecture; from horseshoe-shaped arches and keyhole-shaped windows to stucco and tile work. Such developments in the arts were paralleled by the publication of Edward Fitzgerald's translations of the 'Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam' (1859) and Sir Richard Burton's translation of 'The Thousand and One Nights' (1885).

European admiration for gilded and enamelled glass from the Medieval Islamic world (and for Venetian glass, which owed a good deal to this) led to the production of objects in a similar style, including



mosque lamps modelled upon those of the great Sultan Hasan mosque in Cairo, by European glassmakers - notably Philippe-Joseph Brocard in Paris, and the firm of J and L Lobmeyr in Vienna. In some cases these 'imitations' were even imported back into the Islamic world, where the local enamelled glassmaking industry had largely died out, such as for the royal mosque of Al-Rifa'i in Cairo (1869-1912), which was completed by the German architect Max Herz. A further example of this 're-importing' of Islamic (or 'Orientalised') motifs from Europe is the Sirkeci railway station in Istanbul. Designed in 1890 by the German architect August Jachmund, it possesses an eclectic mixture of North African, Indian and other 'exotic' elements melded onto what was otherwise essentially a Neo-Classical façade.

At the same time as this European influence was making itself felt in Islamic art and society, a number of revivalist

movements emerged in Islamic art during the second half of the 19th century. Muslim patrons and artists began to enjoy a growing interest in their own cultural heritage, during the rise of nationalist sentiment which accompanied the gradual weakening and dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. As local powers grew in strength, so did a desire to project a distinctive image at the great international exhibitions of the 19th century in Europe and the US. There was a demand for artefacts from Western collectors and museums, and a desire on the part of European visitors for souvenirs of their travels. This prompted local craftsmen to manufacture objects in an appropriate historical or archaic style. All these factors might be cited as reasons for the emergence of this period of revivalism. In some cases its development was fostered by Western historians or politicians who wished, for political convenience, to create a distinct cultural identity for a country.

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 Above: Male duck. Company school, India. Circa 1790. Opaque watercolour on paper. 37.5 x 55 cm. © The Nour Foundation.
 Below: Serving spoon. Iran. 19th century. Steel with pierced ornament and gold damascening. Length 49.5 cm. © The Nour Foundation.

Above: Woman's or child's coat (*don*). Central Asia, middle Oxus area, Turkmen or Uzbek. 1800-1850. *Ikat* silk velvet, calico, silk embroidery. 122 x 155 cm (with sleeves fully extended). © The Nour Foundation.

Facing page: Doublure of a lacquer-painted binding of a single-volume Qur'an; the copying of the text of this Qur'an is attributed to the famous Qajar calligrapher, Visal, Iran, Shiraz. Main text circa 1844 (1260 AH). Persian translation dated 1856 (1272 AH). Ink, gold and opaque watercolour on paper, *Naskh* script. 34.7 x 22.7 cm © The Nour Foundation.

On the other hand, there were those who believed that certain countries were in cultural decline; such as Egypt since the fall of the Mamluks, and Iran since the fall of the Safavids.

The appearance of revivalism was not uniform across the Islamic world; instead it occurred at different times in different areas, and took on a variety of forms. Nor were revivalism and European influences necessarily mutually exclusive. The reign of the Paris-educated Khedive Isma'il (1863-79) in Egypt coincided both with the opening of the Suez Canal (1869) and the commissioning of the most important building of the Mamluk revival, the royal mosque of Al-Rifa'i in Cairo. The reformist policies of Muhammad 'Ali (1805-48) in Egypt were clearly visible in the adoption of an Ottoman style for his mosque (built 1820-57) rather than a Mamluk one. Notwithstanding, the second half of the 19th century in Egypt was marked by a growing interest in the cultural heritage of the Mamluk period (1250-1517). This is excellently illustrated by the revival of inlaid metalwork manufacture, which had been greatly refined under the Mamluks.

However, the technique used during the 19th century was somewhat different from the period it emulated, and involved inlaying objects with silver wire instead of silver sheet. In 1905, Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India, commissioned an Egyptian craftsman to make a lamp for the Taj Mahal in India, in bronze with gold and silver inlay, similar to the one that had once hung in the mosque of the Mamluk Sultan Baybars II in Cairo.

While the Mamluk period was seen as the apogee of cultural achievement in Egypt, historians revelled in the



Safavid period art of 19th-century Iran (1501-1732). Not only were lacquer-painted objects of the Qajar period decorated in contemporary style (such as the work of Muhammad Isma'il and Luft 'Ali Shirazi), but lacquer objects were also decorated in the Safavid style, including steel items.

Safavid art was not the only genre emulated in 19th-century Iran. For example, during the second half of the 19th century the renewed production of lustre ware in Tehran and Isfahan in a style that pre-dated the Safavid period (in particular by the potter 'Ali Muhammad), was an attempt to sate the appetite of European collectors.

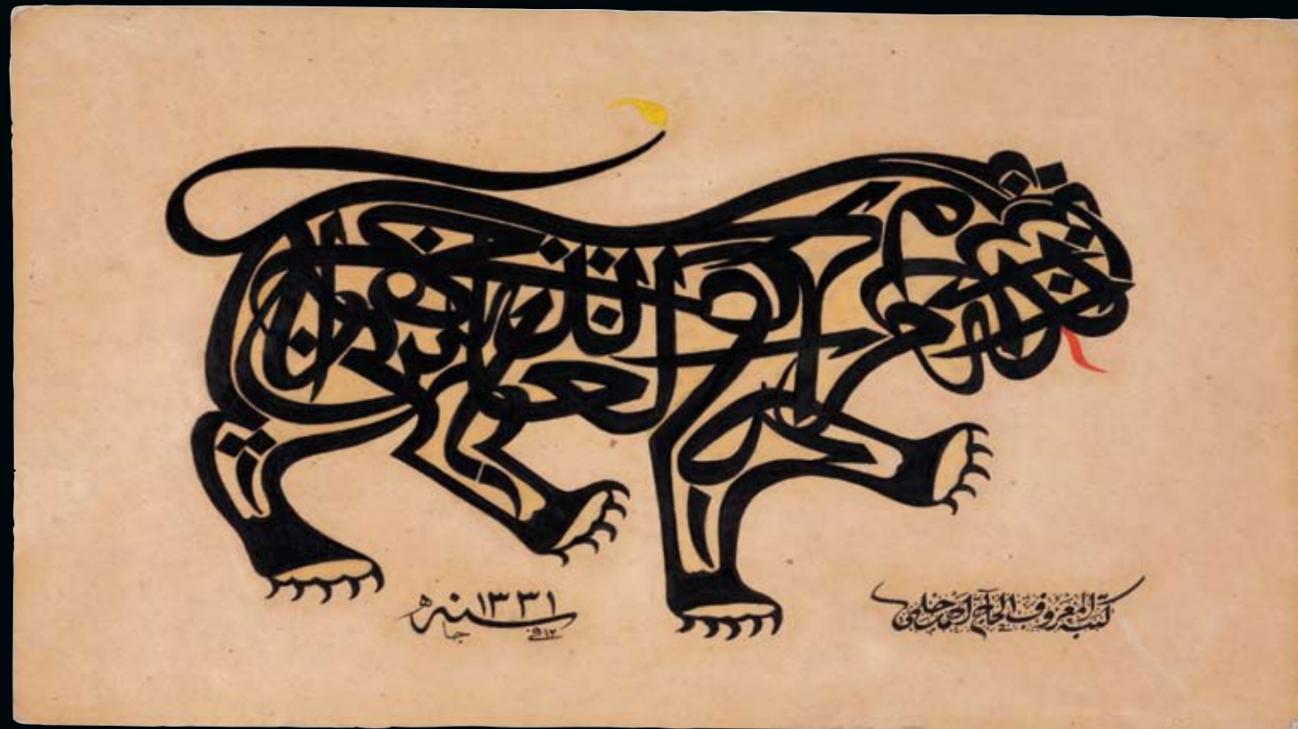
The accession of the first Qajar ruler had brought a period of disunity in Iran to an end. There was a need to give Qajar power greater legitimacy. This can be seen in the creation of elaborate court ceremonials in the idiom of pre-Islamic Iran, as well as in the emphasis placed on royal portraiture. In portraits of the Qajar ruler Fath 'Ali Shah (1797-1834), for example, the

long beard and distinctive facial features follow Sasanian and Achaemenid prototypes. Large scale painted rock carvings (which had not been a feature of Iranian art for well over 1000 years) were commissioned, and often located adjacent to (or even carved over) their pre-Islamic counterparts.

During the early years of the 19th century in India, officials of the British East India Company and other Europeans on the subcontinent began commissioning studies of Indian plants and animals from local Indian artists. The detailed, naturalistic style in which these studies were painted is known as 'Company School'. In 1804, Marquis Wellesley, Governor of Bengal, established an 'Institution for Promoting the Natural History of India' at Barrackpore near Calcutta where Indian painters worked under the supervision of an employee of the East India Company's medical service.

In Ottoman Turkey, revivalism is less clearly defined than in Egypt or Iran. Instead, what is most evident running

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through Ottoman art of the 19th century is the continued primacy of the art of calligraphy - a pre-eminence underscored by the exceptionally fine work of Ottoman calligraphers such as Mustafa Rakim (1757-1826) and Mustafa Izzet (1801-76), and by the high level of calligraphic skill attained by Ottoman sultans such as Mahmud II (1808-39), who studied under Mustafa Rakim, and Abdülmecid I (1839-61).

Yet these outstanding examples of what must be counted as a highly traditional art form were produced during a period of reform and modernisation. Traditional court dress was abandoned, and the fez was adopted as a form of headwear devoid of rank or status. In addition, the predominant architectural style of the period was imported from Europe. This is a testament not only to the continuing importance of calligraphy (as is the emphasis on the power of the word in the work of many Contemporary artists from the Islamic world today), but also to the enduring vitality of Islamic art during a period of great political, cultural and technological change. □

Facing page: Calligraphic composition in *Thulth* in the form of a lion, Ottoman Turkey. Dated 12 Jumada Al-Awal 1331 AH (19 April, 1913). 26.5 x 38.8 cm. © The Nour Foundation.

Above: Single-volume Qur'an, signed by Seyyid Mehmed Nûrî, Ottoman Balkans. Dated 1849-1850 (1266 AH). Ink, gold and opaque watercolour on paper, 308 folios, *Naskh* script, 15 lines to the page. 17.1 x 11.7 cm. © The Nour Foundation.

The 19th-century objects in the Nasser D Khalili Collection are published in a catalogue by Stephen Vernoit: 'Occidentalism: Islamic Art in the 19th Century (The Nasser D Khalili Collection of Islamic Art: Volume XXIII)', London 1997. For further information, visit www.khalili.org

'Arts of Islam: Treasures from the Collection of Nasser D Khalili' at the Art Gallery Of New South Wales, Sydney runs until 23 September. For more information, please visit www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au