

21M.289 – MFA Visit
by anonymous MIT student

1. What kinds of different relationships can be seen in this collection between writing and image? And between image and object? Give an example of an object that you find engages with these tensions in interesting ways.
 - Most of the writing on the objects are written in Kufic – tension exists here as Kufic used to be a centre of knowledge and writing as we understand it are typically used to convey a message. Kufic as a form of writing is purposely made more difficult to read. It is expected that one would know what the meaning of a particular script in advance rather than having to try and decipher it from the object itself. As such on one hand, while writing is typically aimed at conveying message, Kufic on the other hand does not focus too much on that, rather it allows for the writer to focus more on its stylistic design, infusing designs such as knots and flowers. Noticed at times there were also use of animals i.e. birds. (Fig 1– candle stick)



- On image and object, at times the infusion of writing seem to go against the function of a particular object – one example was the mirror on display. It had Kufic scripts which invoked good fortune all over it but I am pretty sure this would get in the way of providing maximum/ efficient reflection as far as its function as a mirror is concerned. One would expect perhaps writings can be staged in a smaller form maybe around the plate rather than all over it (Fig 2 – Mirror)



2. How Islamic are these objects? Pick two objects with differing qualities/degrees of “Islamic-ness” and briefly compare/contrast them.
 - Referring the Fig 1 i.e. the candlestick, it offers wishes of wealth, good fortune and power to the owner in Kufic writing, but yet it includes design of classical Greek gods i.e. Zeus.
 - Star and Cross tiles (Fig 3) – These tiles were used in mausoleums of key Islamic figures and the ones which includes designs which portrayed human beings were typically used in places where more secular activities took place. It is interesting to note that there were some tiles were shaped in a form of a cross which is central to Christianity.



3. Along the wall opposite the cases of objects are a series of illuminated manuscripts and objects from medieval scientists like al-Jazari. What kinds of relationships between technology and arts is visible? Pick two objects that make use of/explore technology in different ways and briefly compare/contrast them.
 - The Al Jazari collection turned out to be the single most important book which documented Islamic technology. Art was being used in this case to preserve and record achievements on the technological front. Having said that, the art depiction I believe had more to it – I could see certain patterns of single Arabic letters in specific colours which are labelled at certain places. In fact, I feel a bit frustrated of not being able to understand why.



- Device for raising water – this one depicted the use of animal strength (presumably a donkey) walking around a pole and the rotation of the pole works a pump which would pump water up.



- Device for dispensing water – or in this case, it did look like alcoholic beverages as the two individuals down below do look like they are having a bit of fun as they have their arms interlocked, as if encouraging each other to go on.



4. Walk through at least one other gallery in the museum. What do you observe about the curation of the Islamic Art gallery in contrast to others at the museum?
 - The positioning of the Islamic gallery was a bit stretched or in between. As you came down the corridor of Chinese painting, you would end up right smack in the middle of the Islamic gallery, which in my view is inefficient. It would not serve well if a visitor's aim is actually the exhibition at the end of the corridor – you get a bit of a discontinuity. And it is very interesting that at the end of the corridor was an exhibition which had a fair share of nude art.
 - One thing I felt was also less satisfying was the fact that the objects were exhibited backed to a wall – I noticed some of the galleries on the 2nd floor where they

showcase the vase and pots in a clear glass cabinet which allows the visitor to get a 360 degree view of the object.

- I was hoping there were more museum helpers covering the section but there was really no one whom I could engage in throughout my 45 minute stay there.
- Having said that, I have visited the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul before – I do believe MFA has quite a nice job in presenting what they have. Topkapi Palace can surely benefit from some of the lighting work and object commentaries on display.

All in all, I enjoyed the trip immensely. I was also very surprised to see a really good collection of Islamic art review books at the gift shop at the end.

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21M.289 Islam/Media
Spring 2015

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