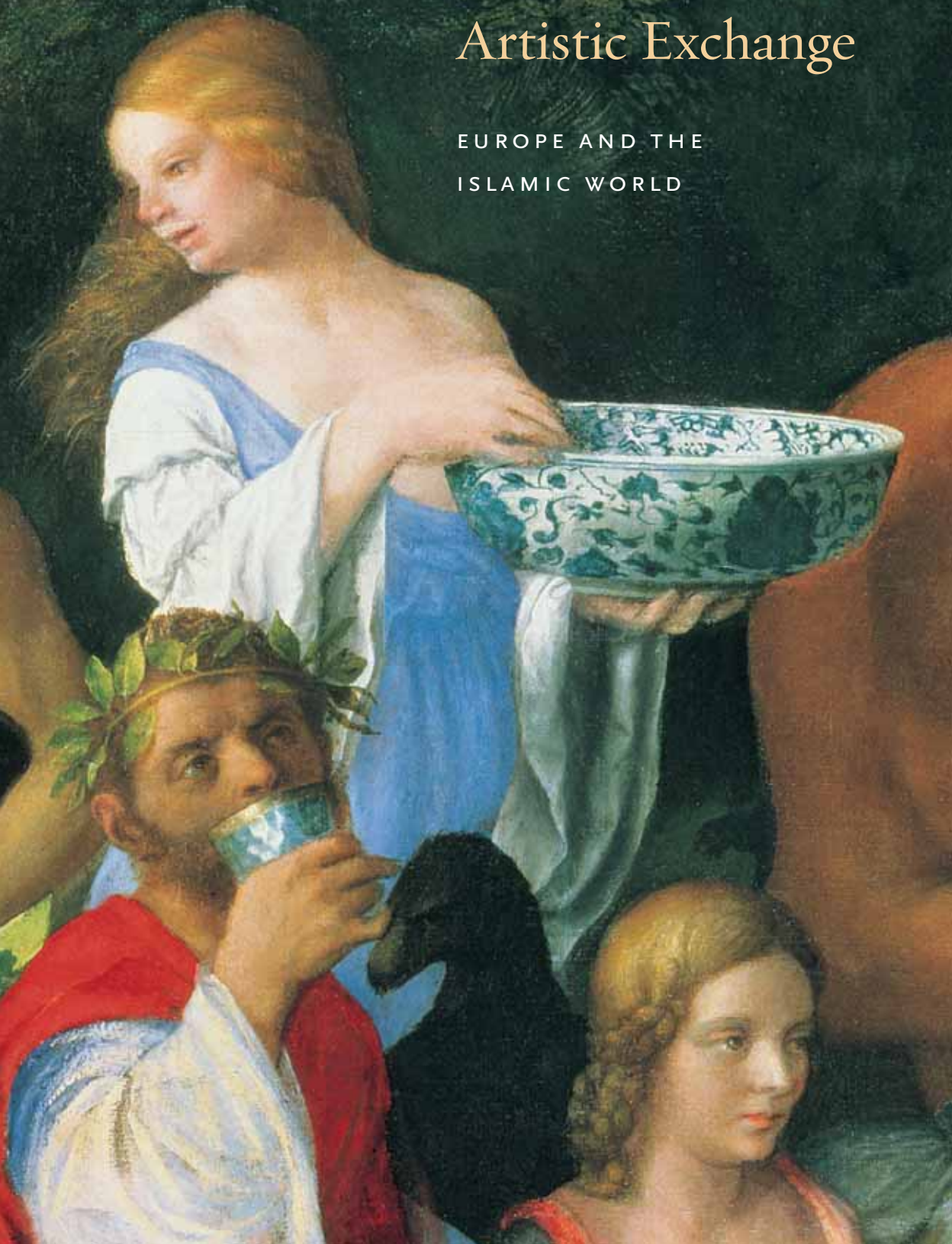


NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

Artistic Exchange

EUROPE AND THE
ISLAMIC WORLD



Great collections of Western art, including the National Gallery of Art's, reflect centuries of contact with the Muslim world and admiration for Islamic art. While the European objects in the Gallery's permanent collection were chosen for their aesthetic qualities and as exemplars of European culture, many reveal the broader international context of their time. In connection with the exhibition *Palace and Mosque: Islamic Art from the Victoria and Albert Museum*, this guide highlights twenty-one of the Gallery's numerous works that illustrate the rich and varied influence of the Islamic world on European art. These works are located in the West Building and have special labels with turquoise borders.

During the early Middle Ages, few Europeans encountered art from Africa and Asia, except for kings and emperors who received marvelous objects as diplomatic gifts. The silk robes, huge tent, and live elephant sent from Baghdad by Caliph Harun al-Rashid to Emperor Charlemagne about 800, for example, became legend. More luxurious artifacts arrived during the eleventh century, the spoils of Pisan and Genoese military expeditions in Islamic Sicily, Spain, and North Africa. The Crusades (1098–1291) brought Westerners in direct contact with eastern Islamic lands. Crusaders and Holy Land pilgrims discovered a more refined civilization and a richer material culture than they knew at home. Merchants from Venice, Genoa, Pisa, Marseilles, and Barcelona shipped home increasing quantities of luxury manufactured goods — silks, inlaid metalwork, painted glassware, and ceramics — from ports in Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. During the rule of the Mongol khans (1256–1353), the Asian mainland from Mesopotamia to China opened to European traders and travelers. Despite religious and political differences and periodic wars, Europeans maintained diplomatic and commercial relations with Egypt and Syria from the 1340s, with the Ottoman Empire from the 1450s, and with Safavid Iran from the early 1600s.

The Gallery's Late-Medieval and Renaissance collections reveal this European fascination with Islamic art in both the rendering of the objects and the use of Islamic designs. The portrait of an Italian cardinal makes ostentatious display of his fine Turkish carpet. The golden halo of a Florentine Madonna is patterned after a brass tray with an Arabic inscription from Syria or Egypt. Ceramics and metalwork made in Italy, France, and Germany were inspired not only by Islamic artistic forms and techniques but also by Muslim customs.

Increasing foreign travel in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries encouraged the collection of old Islamic objects. One of the Gallery's founding donors contributed several early oriental carpets to the collection. These are the only Islamic objects in the collection, but hardly the only appearance of Islamic art.



Giotto, probably 1266–1337, *Madonna and Child*, probably 1320/1330, tempera on panel, Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.I.256

The gold borders of the left sleeve and mantle of Giotto's *Madonna* suggest Islamic *tiraz* fabrics, which were distinguished by bands with woven or embroidered Arabic inscriptions honoring Muslim rulers. Imitation *tiraz* bands, which remained common in Italian religious art until the early sixteenth century, are painted with an illegible pseudo-Arabic script.



Gentile da Fabriano, c. 1370–1427, *Madonna and Child*, c. 1422, tempera on panel, Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.I.255

The exquisitely crafted halo of Gentile's *Madonna* was patterned after inlaid brass trays from fourteenth-century Egypt and Syria. Their principal ornament is an encircling inscription in a cursive Arabic script known as Mamluk *thuluth*, after the ruling dynasty. Blossoms or other decorative motifs divide the inscription into equal sections.





Sebastiano del Piombo, 1485–1547, *Cardinal Bandinello Sauli, His Secretary, and Two Geographers*, 1516, oil on panel transferred to canvas, Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.37

The table in Cardinal Bandinello Sauli's portrait is a display of personal symbols. The carpet symbolizes his wealth, elite social status, and refined artistic taste. Its twisted fringes indicate minimal wear. Italians usually kept their best carpets in chests, displaying them on special occasions.



Moretto da Brescia, 1498–1554, *Portrait of a Lady in White*, c. 1540, oil on canvas, Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.230

Shown here is the top of what has come to be called a prayer rug. Renaissance inventories describe them as “mosque carpets.” Their size made them practical in both cultures. Muslims carried them to prayer, and Italians displayed them on furniture.





Giovanni Bellini, c. 1430/1435–1516, and Titian, c. 1490–1576, *The Feast of the Gods*, 1514/1529, oil on canvas, Widener Collection 1942.9.1

The bowls held by the nymph and placed on the ground accurately represent contemporary Chinese porcelain that was exported in huge quantities to Iran, Syria, and Egypt. Such large serving dishes suited the cuisine and communal meals of the eastern Islamic world, and similarly impressive pieces were sent as diplomatic gifts from the sultans of Egypt to the Venetian government.



Chinese Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644, *Stem Bowl*, 1426/1435, porcelain with underglaze blue decoration, Harry G. Steele Collection, Gift of Grace C. Steele 1972.43.5

During the reign of Ming-Dynasty Emperor Xuande (reigned 1426–1435), blue-and-white porcelain that previously had been more popular in the Islamic world than in China, gained favor at his court. Pieces of such high quality were produced at the imperial kilns at Jingdezhen.





Workshop of Maestro Giorgio Andreoli of Gubbio, 16th century, *Plate with border of foliate scrollwork; in the center, shield of arms of Vigerio of Savona, 1524, tin-glazed earthenware (maiolica), Widener Collection 1942.9.331*

This plate, made for the Vigerio family of Savona, echoes the most coveted ceramics of the fifteenth-century Mediterranean world: the lusterware produced in Valencia, Spain. Made by Moorish potters trained in the style of Muslim Spain, Valencia wares could be commissioned with personal insignia framed by delicate floral scrolls in luster and blue. Rich Italian families ordered huge quantities painted with their coats-of-arms.



Medici Porcelain Factory, Italian, *Flask, c. 1575/1587, or slightly later imitation porcelain (a version of soft-paste porcelain), Widener Collection 1942.9.354*

Although the manufacture of true porcelain remained a Chinese secret, potters employed by the Medici grand dukes in Florence produced a soft-paste imitation after years of experimentation. A mysterious “Levantine,” probably someone from the Islamic world, guided them to success. Plant motifs on Iznik ceramics produced in Ottoman Turkey, based in turn on Chinese examples, inspired the ornament on this flask.





French, 13th century, *Pyx in the Form of a Dove*, c. 1220/1230, gilded copper with enamel, Widener Collection 1942.9.284

This Eucharistic dove was made to hang above a church altar and store Hosts, wafers or bread, for the Mass. The dove resembles medieval Islamic bronze birds, many of which served as containers or were made as ornaments on larger objects. Inset eyes of blue or green glass were intended to ward off evil and jealousy.



Probably English or Scandinavian, 13th century, *Aquamanile in the Form of a Horseman*, Widener Collection 1942.9.280

Aquamanilia — pitchers in the form of humans or animals — are used for liturgical or secular hand washing. They were first produced in Western Europe during the twelfth century, following direct contact with Islamic civilization during the Crusades. In the age before forks, the Muslim practice of hand washing before and after meals, would have impressed Europeans, as did the vessels they used in the process.

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