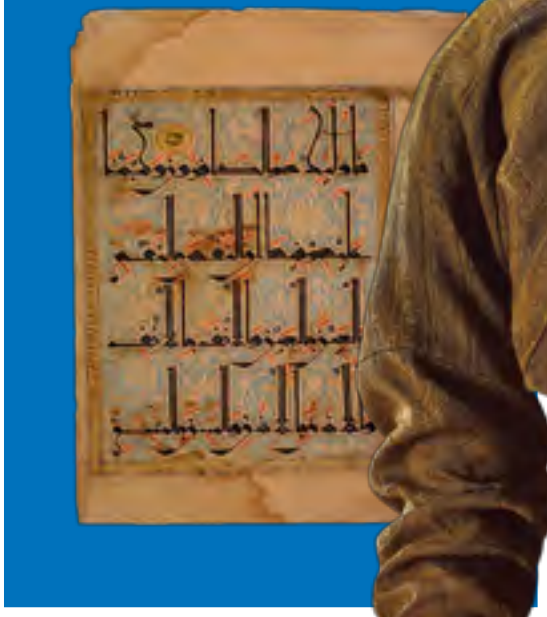
THE AGA KHAN ACADEMIES · EXCELLENCE ·

excellence in

EDUCATION

TREASURES OF THE SILK ROUTES

TEACHERS' GUIDE



AGA KHAN MUSEUM

A collection of objects and stories of the Silk Routes from the Aga Khan Museum.

A resource for history, humanities and arts teachers in the IB Middle Years Programme.

Table of contents

How to use this resource

What stories can objects tell us? What questions can we ask to better understand these stories?

The goal of this resource is to help students discover as much about an object as possible simply by looking closely at the object and interpreting what they see. They can then use the information acquired to understand the broader cultural context in which the object was produced.

At no point is the student expected to engage in this process of discovery alone. Much like a tour through a museum without a guide, a collection of objects without details may leave key understandings untaught. The pages that follow in this resource are meant to help teachers become guides so they can lead this process of inquiry.

The role of the teacher is to promote student questions and answer them with whatever information is available in this resource. As listed in the learning outcomes below, the act of engaging in independent thinking is just as important as the knowledge and understanding to be gained from the lesson. The teacher guides students through two processes:

i. how to ask good questions
ii. how to make connections to prior knowledge.

Exploring all the objects and stories included in this resource would take approximately two 50-minute lessons.

Each of the objects selected tells an important story about the diversity and cultural interaction along the Silk Routes. It is expected that different schools will need to adapt the lesson and the choice of objects to their own context. If time is limited and working through the entire resource is not a possibility, we suggest teachers initially focus on objects 3, 5, 7, 10 and 11.

What is presented in the pages that follow is meant to provide teachers with enough background information to feel comfortable in facilitating student understanding. Further information about definitions used in this resource can be found in the Penguin Reference Library's *Dictionary of Islam*. Further information about the objects themselves can be found at www.agakhanmuseum.org.

Key learning outcomes:

Students should **know** that the artistic traditions and styles along the Silk Routes were created by a diverse mix of people and cultures.

Students should **understand** that as cultures encounter one another they exchange ideas and evolve.

Students should **engage** in independent thinking through close observation of historic/artistic objects as well as making links to their prior knowledge and understandings.

How can we introduce and situate these lessons?

By its very nature, this task sits at the intersection of humanities, history and the visual arts and can be used in any of these subjects, or in an interdisciplinary manner.

At the Aga Khan Academy Mombasa, this resource was designed as one part of a larger interdisciplinary exploration of the geography, trade, music, arts and cultural encounters of the Silk Routes. As the objects require having some prior knowledge of the civilisations involved with trade along the Silk Routes, we have placed it at the end of our Silk Routes unit. In this way, the broader unit provided the necessary context and connections for student learning.

How do we introduce and present the objects?

The best way to introduce an object is simply to present the visual image and ask students questions that include conditional terms. Language such as 'might,' 'could,' 'infer' and 'suggest' helps students to understand that they are trying to work things out rather than find one right answer. The following questions help to create a comfortable atmosphere of speculative inquiry:

- What can you see?
- What uses come to mind when you look at the object?
- What questions do you have about the object?
- Where and when might this be from? Why do you think this?
- What languages or symbols do you see? What might they suggest?
- Who could have produced this object and why might they have done so?
- What might have influenced the design and artistic style?
- What could we infer from this about cultural exchange along the Silk Routes?

How do we bring it all together?

Use one or more of the following reflection questions to bring together the experience and wrap up the inquiry. These questions can also be found in the reflection task located at the back of this resource booklet.

To get students to consider how they acquired the knowledge they've gained in this lesson, try the following questions:

- How much can we know from observation about the origin of each object?
- What factors made it difficult to gain a complete picture about an object's history?

To lead students into a discussion on the relationship between these objects and cultural exchange, try asking:

- What connections can you make between the use, material and style of the objects and the geography of the Silk Routes?
- Which objects showed the most exchange between cultures?

To encourage students to make broader connections with their prior knowledge of the different periods and civilisations of the Silk Routes, as well as connections with the modern world, probe them with the following:

- What makes this period (during the early Muslim dynasties and Mongol rule) different from other periods in the Silk Routes' history?
- Are there modern equivalents of the kind of cultural exchange that existed along the Silk Routes?

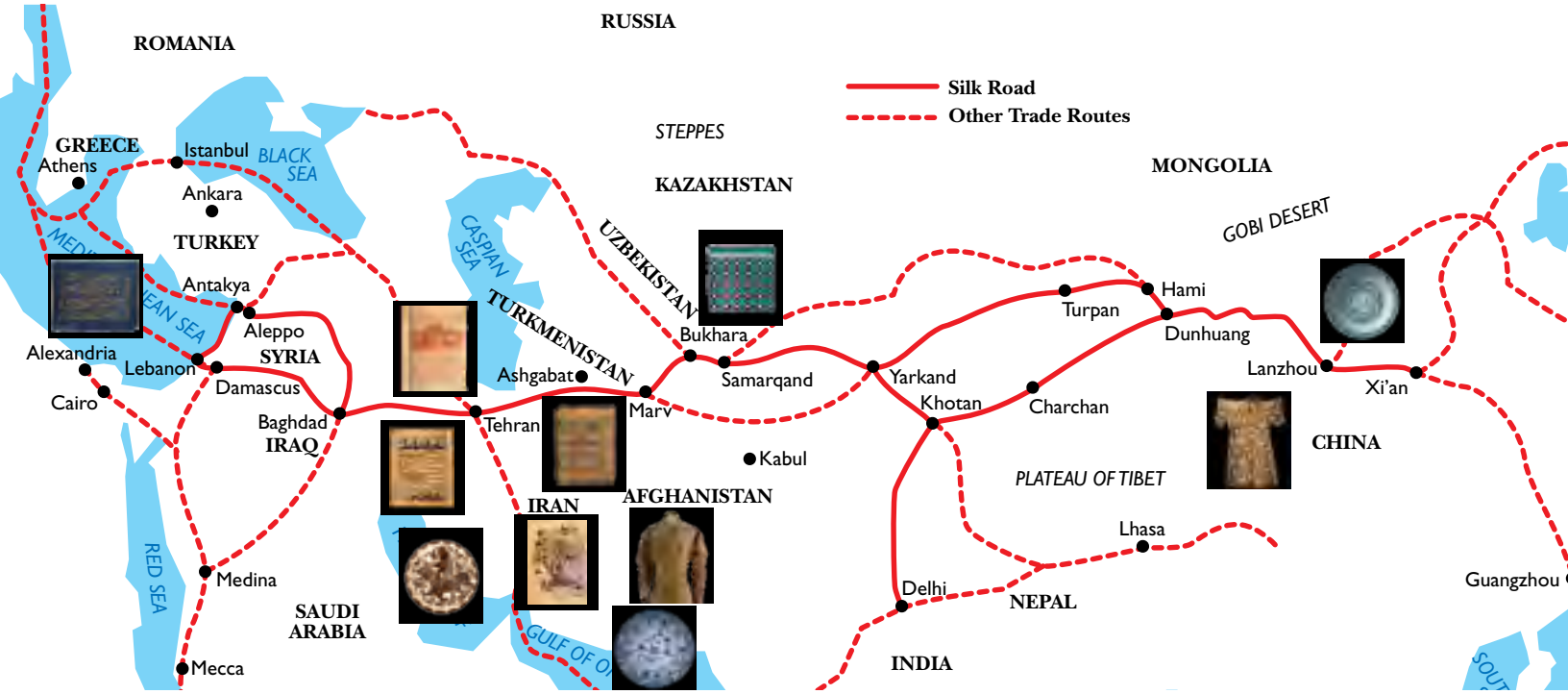
The Silk Routes and the arts of Muslim societies

Over their 2000-year history, the Silk Routes became links between multiple places, people and cultures as well as a thread between a series of dynasties and societies.

Through these selected objects we can clearly see examples of historical continuity and change in artistic practice, across the vast geography of the Silk Routes.

Many of the objects show clear innovations, brought from other parts of the Silk Routes to areas within the Islamic world. Others show the adaptation of one style with another from an entirely different context. Some objects come from major centres along the Silk Routes and have a blend of styles and traditions. For others, the difficulty of tracing a clear location of origin demonstrates the exchange of artistic techniques and motifs resulting in similar styles, east or west, north or south.

Taken as a whole, these objects can be clearly placed in the last quarter of the Silk Routes' history. It is through these later objects that the amalgamation of a rich mixing of cultures is made visible. From the early North African Blue Qur'an to the porcelain Chinese and Arabic calligraphed bowls of the Mongol dynasty, we can witness people building on traditions of previous periods and empires, and synchronising artistic techniques from cultures thousands of miles apart.



Map of selected objects from the Aga Khan Museum collection, by origin

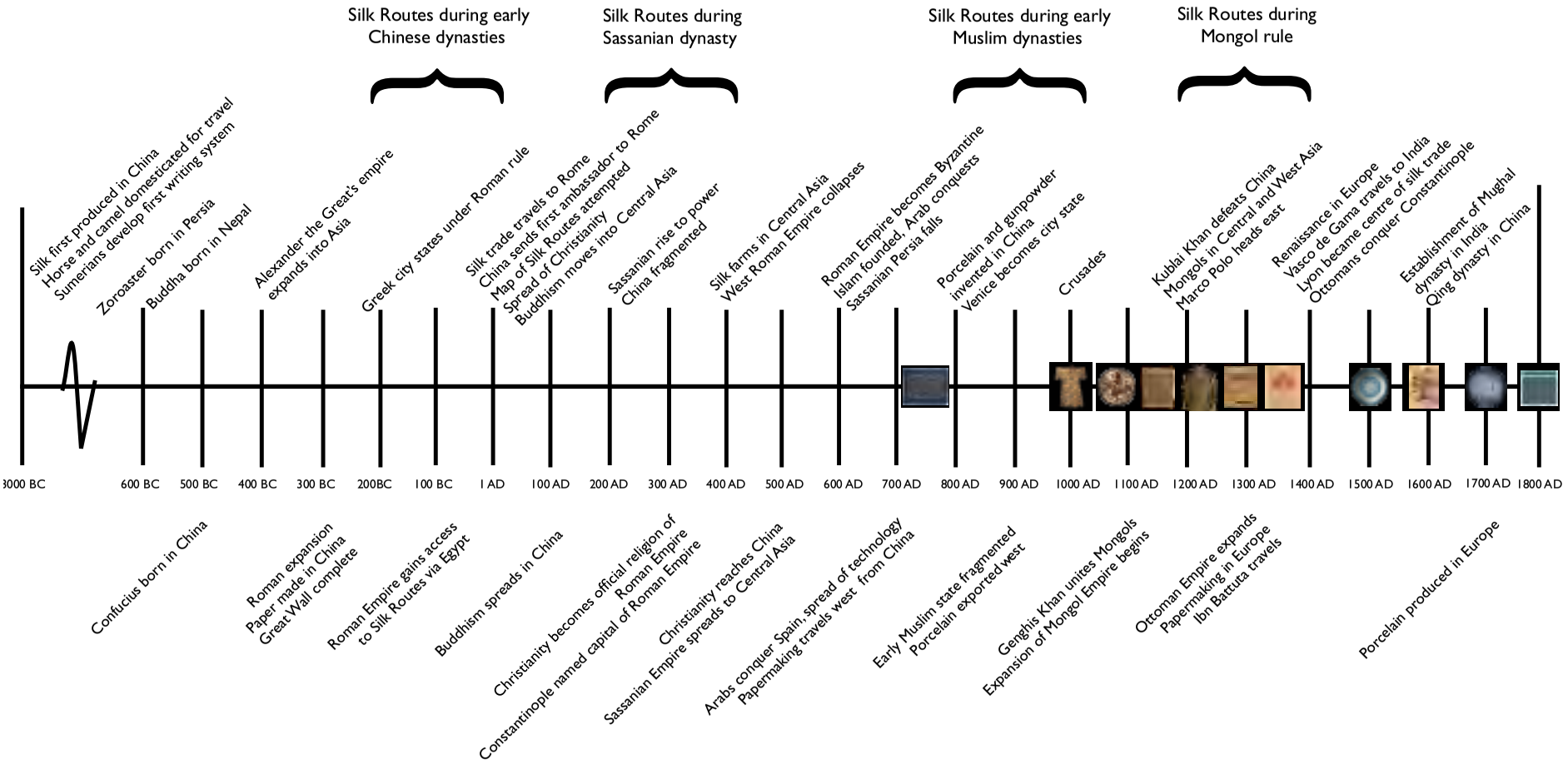
Guiding questions on the arts of Muslim societies:

How do the different Muslim dynasties and rulers contribute to the evolution of cultures and art forms?

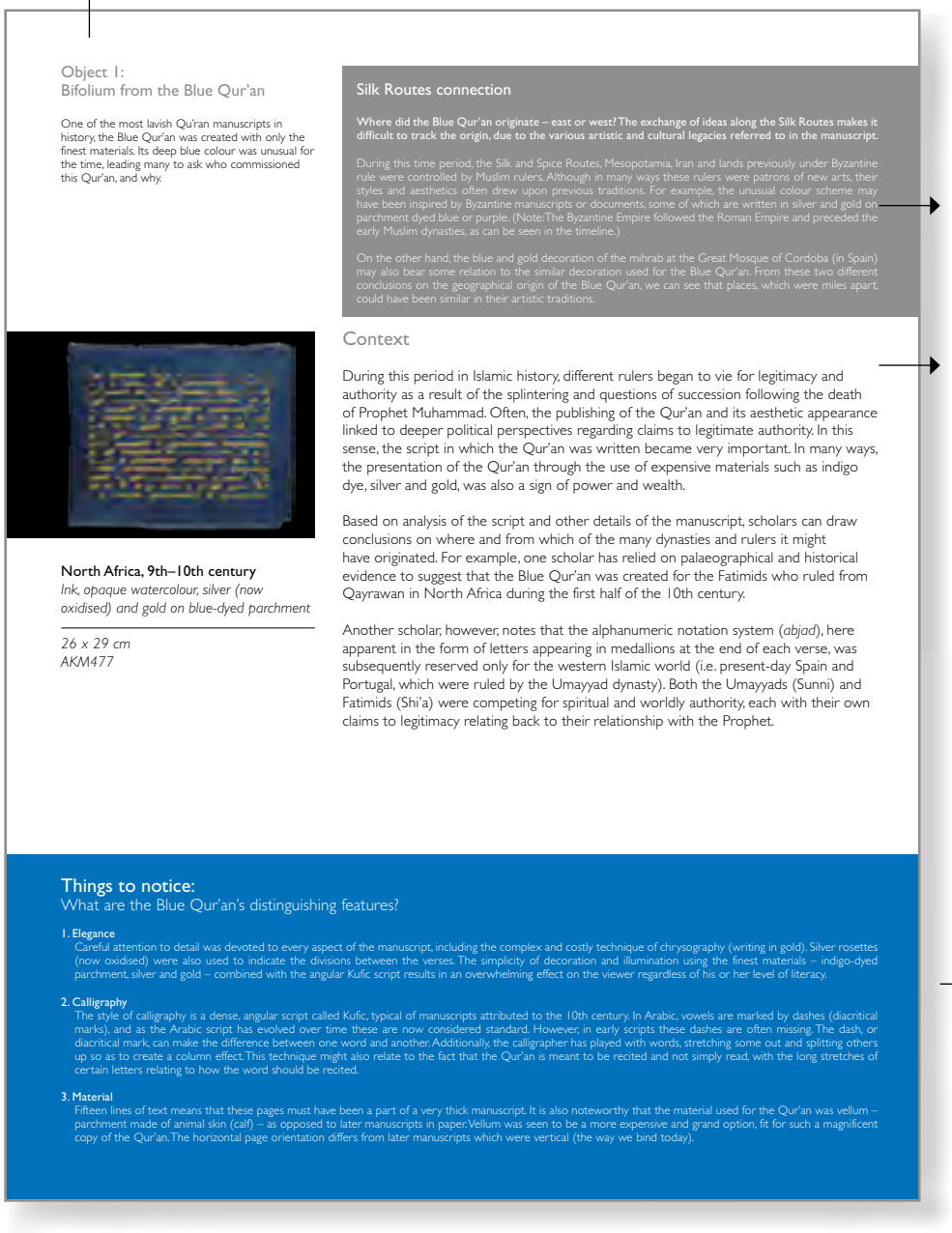
Are there trends that are consistent across time and space?

What do the objects (and their uses) tell us about the societies of the time? What similarities and differences do they share with our societies today?

Timeline of significant events along the Silk Routes



How to read this guide



Object 1:
Bifolium from the Blue Qur'an

One of the most lavish Qu'ran manuscripts in history, the Blue Qur'an was created with only the finest materials. Its deep blue colour was unusual for the time, leading many to ask who commissioned this Qur'an, and why.

Silk Routes connection

Where did the Blue Qur'an originate – east or west? The exchange of ideas along the Silk Routes makes it difficult to track the origin, due to the various artistic and cultural legacies referred to in the manuscript.

During this time period, the Silk and Spice Routes, Mesopotamia, Iran and lands previously under Byzantine rule were controlled by Muslim rulers. Although in many ways these rulers were patrons of new arts, their styles and aesthetics often drew upon previous traditions. For example, the unusual colour scheme may have been inspired by Byzantine manuscripts or documents, some of which are written in silver and gold on parchment dyed blue or purple. (Note: The Byzantine Empire followed the Roman Empire and preceded the early Muslim dynasties, as can be seen in the timeline.)

On the other hand, the blue and gold decoration of the mihrab at the Great Mosque of Cordoba (in Spain) may also bear some relation to the similar decoration used for the Blue Qur'an. From these two different conclusions on the geographical origin of the Blue Qur'an, we can see that places, which were miles apart, could have been similar in their artistic traditions.

Context

During this period in Islamic history, different rulers began to vie for legitimacy and authority as a result of the splintering and questions of succession following the death of Prophet Muhammad. Often, the publishing of the Qur'an and its aesthetic appearance linked to deeper political perspectives regarding claims to legitimate authority. In this sense, the script in which the Qur'an was written became very important. In many ways, the presentation of the Qur'an through the use of expensive materials such as indigo dye, silver and gold, was also a sign of power and wealth.

Based on analysis of the script and other details of the manuscript, scholars can draw conclusions on where and from which of the many dynasties and rulers it might have originated. For example, one scholar has relied on palaeographical and historical evidence to suggest that the Blue Qur'an was created for the Fatimids who ruled from Qayrawan in North Africa during the first half of the 10th century.

Another scholar, however, notes that the alphanumeric notation system (*abjad*), here apparent in the form of letters appearing in medallions at the end of each verse, was subsequently reserved only for the western Islamic world (i.e. present-day Spain and Portugal, which were ruled by the Umayyad dynasty). Both the Umayyads (Sunni) and Fatimids (Shi'a) were competing for spiritual and worldly authority, each with their own claims to legitimacy relating back to their relationship with the Prophet.

North Africa, 9th–10th century
Ink, opaque watercolour, silver (now oxidised) and gold on blue-dyed parchment

26 x 29 cm
AKM477

Things to notice:
What are the Blue Qur'an's distinguishing features?

1. Elegance
Careful attention to detail was devoted to every aspect of the manuscript, including the complex and costly technique of chrysography (writing in gold). Silver rosettes (now oxidised) were also used to indicate the divisions between the verses. The simplicity of decoration and illumination using the finest materials – indigo-dyed parchment, silver and gold – combined with the angular Kufic script results in an overwhelming effect on the viewer regardless of his or her level of literacy.

2. Calligraphy
The style of calligraphy is a dense, angular script called Kufic, typical of manuscripts attributed to the 10th century. In Arabic, vowels are marked by dashes (diacritical marks), and as the Arabic script has evolved over time these are now considered standard. However, in early scripts these dashes are often missing. The dash, or diacritical mark, can make the difference between one word and another. Additionally, the calligrapher has played with words, stretching some out and splitting others up so as to create a column effect. This technique might also relate to the fact that the Qur'an is meant to be recited and not simply read, with the long stretches of certain letters relating to how the word should be recited.

3. Material
Fifteen lines of text means that these pages must have been a part of a very thick manuscript. It is also noteworthy that the material used for the Qur'an was vellum – parchment made of animal skin (calf) – as opposed to later manuscripts in paper. Vellum was seen to be a more expensive and grand option, fit for such a magnificent copy of the Qur'an. The horizontal page orientation differs from later manuscripts which were vertical (the way we bind today).

1. Look here for a brief introduction and a question to guide your students' inquiry. Sections 2,3 and 4 will help you to structure student discussion of the question.

2. Here you will find the main connections the object has with the Silk Route and with the timeline on page 4.

3. Read this to learn more about the history and context of the object, particularly in relation to early history of Muslim societies.

4. If student inquiry does not lead to discussion of these features, share this section with students as you observe the object through an artistic lens.

Object 1:
Bifolium from the Blue Qur'an

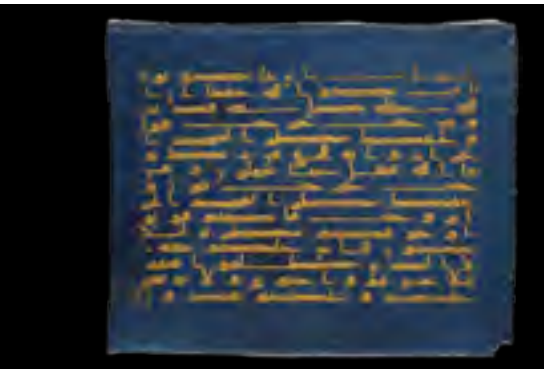
One of the most lavish Qu'ran manuscripts in history, the Blue Qur'an was created with only the finest materials. Its deep blue colour was unusual for the time, leading many to ask who commissioned this Qur'an, and why.

Silk Routes connection

Where did the Blue Qur'an originate – east or west? The exchange of ideas along the Silk Routes makes it difficult to track the origin, due to the various artistic and cultural legacies referred to in the manuscript.

During this time period, the Silk and Spice Routes, Mesopotamia, Iran and lands previously under Byzantine rule were controlled by Muslim rulers. Although in many ways these rulers were patrons of new arts, their styles and aesthetics often drew upon previous traditions. For example, the unusual colour scheme may have been inspired by Byzantine manuscripts or documents, some of which are written in silver and gold on parchment dyed blue or purple. (*Note: The Byzantine Empire followed the Roman Empire and preceded the early Muslim dynasties, as can be seen in the timeline.*)

On the other hand, the blue and gold decoration of the *mihrab* at the Great Mosque of Cordoba (in Spain) may also bear some relation to the similar decoration used for the Blue Qur'an. From these two different conclusions on the geographical origin of the Blue Qur'an, we can see that places, which were miles apart, could have been similar in their artistic traditions.



North Africa, 9th–10th century
Ink, opaque watercolour, silver (now oxidised) and gold on blue-dyed parchment

26 x 29 cm
AKM477

Context

During this period in Islamic history, different rulers began to vie for legitimacy and authority as a result of the splintering and questions of succession following the death of Prophet Muhammad. Often, the publishing of the Qur'an and its aesthetic appearance linked to deeper political perspectives regarding claims to legitimate authority. In this sense, the script in which the Qur'an was written became very important. In many ways, the presentation of the Qur'an through the use of expensive materials such as indigo dye, silver and gold was also a sign of power and wealth.

Based on analysis of the script and other details of the manuscript, scholars can draw conclusions on where and from which of the many dynasties and rulers it might have originated. For example, one scholar has relied on palaeographical and historical evidence to suggest that the Blue Qur'an was created for the Fatimids who ruled from Qayrawan in North Africa during the first half of the 10th century.

Another scholar, however, notes that the alphanumeric notation system (*abjad*), here apparent in the form of letters appearing in medallions at the end of each verse, was subsequently reserved only for the western Islamic world (i.e. present-day Spain and Portugal, which were ruled by the Umayyad dynasty). Both the Umayyads (Sunni) and Fatimids (Shi'a) were competing for spiritual and worldly authority, each with their own claims to legitimacy relating back to their relationship with the Prophet.

Things to notice:
What are the Blue Qur'an's distinguishing features?

1. Elegance
Careful attention to detail was devoted to every aspect of the manuscript, including the complex and costly technique of chrysography (writing in gold). Silver rosettes (now oxidised) were also used to indicate the divisions between the verses. The simplicity of decoration and illumination using the finest materials – indigo-dyed parchment, silver and gold – combined with the angular Kufic script results in an overwhelming effect on the viewer regardless of his or her level of literacy.

2. Calligraphy
The style of calligraphy is a dense, angular script called Kufic, typical of manuscripts attributed to the 10th century. In Arabic, vowels are marked by dashes (diacritical marks), and as the Arabic script has evolved over time these are now considered standard. However, in early scripts these dashes are often missing. The dash, or diacritical mark, can make the difference between one word and another. Additionally, the calligrapher has played with words, stretching some out and splitting others up so as to create a column effect. This technique might also relate to the fact that the Qur'an is meant to be recited and not simply read, with the long stretches of certain letters relating to how the word should be recited.

3. Material
Fifteen lines of text means that these pages must have been a part of a very thick manuscript. It is also noteworthy that the material used for the Qur'an was vellum – parchment made of animal skin (calf) – as opposed to later manuscripts in paper. Vellum was seen to be a more expensive and grand option, fit for such a magnificent copy of the Qur'an. The horizontal page orientation differs from later manuscripts which were vertical (the way we bind today).

Object 2:
Folio from the Qarmathian Qur'an

Almost three centuries later, the Qur'anic manuscript tradition looks significantly different. What has changed since the ninth century, both along the Silk Routes and in the Islamic world?

Silk Routes connection

One of the greatest inventions of the Chinese, paper and its production, made its way from east to west through the Silk Routes. First developed in 300 BC in China, the art and science of papermaking spread to Europe during the 14th century, almost a millennium later. How did this technology travel from China to Europe?

By the ninth century, within two centuries of the Prophet Muhammad's passing, Muslim rule had expanded from Spain to the borders of China. The new reaches of the empire often brought new members to the quickly increasing Muslim population. With this came a need for mass production of the Qur'an and the need for more economical printing technologies and materials, making paper a viable alternative to the traditional vellum manuscripts.

Iran, 12th century
Ink, opaque watercolour and gold on paper

26 x 29 cm
AKM477

Context

At this time, Iran was not yet ruled by the Mongols, and the Abbasid state (caliphate) still maintained a strong hold over Baghdad, which ultimately fell to the Mongols in 1258. Until this point, Baghdad, as the seat of the caliphate's power, had been an important centre of learning and development.

This period saw innovation in the arts, with the state as the primary patron. In relation to the Qur'anic arts, this was often linked to a desire to standardise or canonise the text, using a unique script. At this time, the two main scripts employed were Kufic and Naskh, each used by different types of rulers.

In the 10th century, the famous Abbasid vizier and calligrapher Ibn Muqla sought to systematise handwriting through the Naskh script. At about the same time, the Qur'an was used as a source for learning grammar and language in *madrasas* (schools). Widespread use in *madrasas* of the new Qur'ans with the standardised Naskh script meant that this became the popular script of the time. As such, the use of Kufic script was limited to the Shi'i states and lands in North Africa. In other areas, Kufic became a relic of the past, associated with only the earliest Qur'ans.

Despite Ibn Muqla's standardisation efforts in the *madrasas* and courts of Baghdad, this manuscript actually breaks from the tradition of Naskh script. It adopts the old Kufic script but in a new and unique manner adapted for more popular use. For further details of this adaptation see 'Things to notice' below.

Things to notice:
What are the Qarmathian Qur'an's distinguishing features?

1. Scale
Each page contains four lines of script. It is estimated that the whole manuscript must have been 4,500 pages.

2. Calligraphy
The broken angular cursive script is characterised by towering verticals anchored to a strict horizontal baseline with dramatic modulation between thin and thick strokes. It bears some resemblance to the earlier Kufic script but has clearly been adapted with the use of dashes and a vertical orientation rather than a horizontal orientation. This change in orientation and script size suggests an adaption to the beginnings of mass production of Qur'ans for use in *madrasas*.

3. Elaborate Decoration
This is one of the most elaborate Qur'ans in history. Notice the gold borders and medallions. Ink was costly and the detailing required a keen eye and a steady hand.

4. Motifs
Floral designs relate to the ceramics and metalwork of the time as well.

Object 3:
Folio from the *Manafi' al-Hayawan* of Ibn Bukhtishu: 'Shiqraq' (Green Magpie)

We often speak of paper moving from east to west, but this folio is an example of a medieval style of writing that travelled from west to east. How did ancient Greek bestiaries travel to Iran?

Iran, circa 1300 (14th century)
Ink and opaque watercolour on paper

40.1 x 32.2 cm
AKM83

Silk Routes connection

A medieval text from the time of the Mongols, this object demonstrates the travelling of Chinese artistic motifs from east to west and a medieval genre of writing that travelled west to east. Originating from Central Asia, the Mongol rulers conquered lands and moved westwards towards Iran, ultimately conquering the Persian territories. Coming from areas close to China, they brought with them Chinese-inspired techniques.

The mix of Persian and Chinese motifs exemplified in this manuscript is characteristic of the Mongol dynasty tradition. As rulers, they were very open-minded towards the meeting and mixing of various cultures. Another layer of cross-cultural transmission is depicted in the genre of the text itself. The bestiary was a medieval style of writing originating from Greece that combined a naturalistic description of beasts and animals with a moral lesson for its readers.

Context

The author of the original version of this text belonged to the very famous Bukhtishu family of Persian physicians. For six generations the family served at the Abbasid court in Baghdad as physicians and advisors to various rulers. Under the patronage of the Abbasids, they were able to produce many medical texts. The family is also known for their contributions to early medicine by translating various Greek texts into Syriac, Arabic and Persian. They were a part of a larger translation movement which came to be one of the most significant achievements of Islamic civilisations, allowing much of the European world to access previously lost knowledge.

This particular text is based upon a tradition begun by the Greek philosopher Aristotle, where animals are described for their natural attributes accompanied by a moral lesson of some kind – a style which came to be known as a 'bestiary.' Ibn Bukhtishu (d. 1085 CE) composed his bestiary, the *Manafi' al-Hayawan* (Usefulness of Animals) around the middle of the 11th century, describing the entire range of species from humans to insects, including their characteristics and medicinal properties. The original Arabic text was then translated into Persian by 'Abd al-Hadi ibn Muhammad ibn Mahmud ibn Ibrahim al-Maraghi by order of the Mongol Ilkhanid ruler Ghazan Khan (ruled 1295-1304 CE).

The illustration on this folio corresponds to the heading painted in blue and reads, "Concerning the uses of the *shiqraq*", or magpie. The text that follows describes the habits and qualities of the green magpie, which perpetually seeks flies for food. It also states that the droppings of the *shiqraq*, when boiled in fat with gall, will darken white hair, and that the carat value of gold will increase if warmed up under the bird. The text above the heading belongs to a preceding discussion about the properties of the *khuttal*, or swallow. The paintings on both sides of this folio reveal characteristics of early painting of the Mongol empires. For details of these characteristics, see 'Things to notice' below.

Things to notice:
What are the distinguishing features of this copy of the *Manafi' al-Hayawan*?

1. Calligraphy
This folio belongs to a Persian translation of the bestiary, although its headings are written in Arabic in an eastern-style Kufic script (like that of object 2).

2. Chinese-inspired lotus blossom
Most noticeable is the Chinese-inspired large-petalled lotus blossom, reinterpreted by Iranian artists unfamiliar with this species as a flower that grows on land. Lotuses identical to this one appear ubiquitously on tiles from the Ilkhanid palace at Takht-i Sulaiman in Iran.

3. Willow trees
The twists and turns of the willow tree, a technique of detailing nature which is then used in the dramatically gnarled trunks and branches appearing in the Great Mongol *Shahnameh* (circa 1318–35 CE) and extant illustrated manuscripts of the Ilkhanid vizier Rashid al-Din's (d. 1318 CE) *Jami' al-tawarikh* (Compendium of Chronicles) produced in the early 14th century.

Object 4:
Robe

Like the Blue Qur'an, the story of this 11th-century robe's origin is complex. Is it from pre-Islamic (Sassanian) Iran? Or, is the robe an imitation of Iranian style, made in China during the Islamic period?

Iran and China, 1000s–1100s
Silk, woven

AKM676

Silk Routes connection

With a series of diverse and at times conflicting features, this robe carries markers of pre-Islamic Iran, an Islamic inscription, Chinese manufacturing and non-Islamic funeral use. Each aspect adds another clue to the history of its origin, and the way these diverse features travelled along the Silk Routes.

Both the material of the robe (silk) and the mixture of artistic traditions evoked in the style demonstrate the primary products of Silk Routes, silk trade and cultural exchange. The robe calls to mind Sassanian textiles, whilst the fabric may have been woven in either Iran or China. Many theories exist as to where it was manufactured and what the robe was used for.

Context

The Mongols were non-Muslim rulers who began to invade the Islamic lands during this time period, ultimately capturing Baghdad (the seat of Abbasid power) in 1258. Most interesting about them is how they addressed ruling a population whose religion and culture was foreign to them. Later Mongol khans (rulers), began to convert to Islam, but even from the early khans it is clear that their use of religion was often a tool to make themselves appear more legitimate in their authority.

This robe might be better understood if we take into account that at this time in history, the powers over both the land and the trade routes were shifting. After the 13th century, the Mongols begin to gain power over the trade routes. Prior to having this control, their influence can be seen in many of the artistic traditions, including textiles, of the Islamic world. Coming from Mongolia, they were often the bridge between Persian and Chinese artistic traditions, and their openness to religion and different cultures allowed for hybrids to be created.

Things to notice:
What are the robe's distinguishing features?

1. Calligraphic inscription
This detail adds to the complexity of the robe: an inscription in Kufic script in mirror writing was affixed to the shoulder, parallel to the sleeve. The inscription reads: "Glory and prosperity, long life to its possessor."

2. Beaded strip (at base of birds' wings)
A detail which evokes Iranian textiles from the Sassanian tradition.

3. Broad halo on the back (state of preservation)
We can tell from the broad halo on the back, that a body had decomposed within the garment, indicating its funerary use. This makes us think that the textile was not used in an Islamic context, where bodies, wrapped in a shroud, were buried right in the earth. In contrast, garments of this fabric and style have been found in both Europe and in Xinjiang province, China. There are no examples of similar fabrics that would establish beyond all doubt that the robe was made in Iran. Chinese excavations are contributing to our knowledge in this area.

Object 5:
Robe

This robe is an example of one of the finest luxury garments, depicted in Mongol period manuscripts and even on Chinese Buddhist *mandalas*. But the robe's east-to-west connection is believed to extend even to medieval Europe. What does this Mongol robe tells us about early silk weaving in Italy?

Iran or Central Asia, 13th–14th century
Silk brocade or lampas

Height 140 cm
AKM677

Silk Routes connection

The style of this garment models that found in China and later on in Europe. It suggests Chinese influence on Muslim societies and the fertile influence of these societies on the beginnings of luxury fabric manufacture in Europe, particularly in Italy.

Around the time of Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, the Mongol Empire had spanned as far east as China with the Ilkhanate sending emissaries and diplomatic missions to the west as far as Rome and Venice. Beginning as nomadic warriors, as the Mongols adapted to a more imperial lifestyle they began to develop a taste for luxury goods. These fabrics were also shared as diplomatic gifts to European states, including the Vatican.

Context

This lampas robe is among the most luxurious garments of the time and is often featured in manuscripts documenting tales of princes and kings. The robe was never seen without an overcoat that stopped at the shoulders to display its ultra long sleeves. The weave of the fabric is also complex and is referred to as *panni tartarici* or 'tatar cloths'. Although it is difficult to trace the exact manufacturing centre, customarily the Mongols spared skilled weavers, from all backgrounds, from their militaristic pursuits. These artisans were then distributed randomly in workshops, serving royal courts across the empire, making it possible for Persian artisans to work alongside Chinese craftsmen, creating a blend of techniques and styles.

These luxurious fabrics were documented in the inventory of the Vatican and the Pope between 1311 and 1361 CE, as well as in English and French inventories between 1295 CE (London, St. Paul's Cathedral) and 1380 CE (inventory of Charles V). The *panni tartarici* (tatar cloths) are kept among the treasures of western churches, but this is the only model which has retained its original cut. The arrival of these fabrics among civil and religious treasures (diplomatic gifts) had an impact on Italian Gothic silk designs. This garment, therefore, speaks of Chinese influence on the Islamic world and the fertile influence of the latter on the beginnings of luxury fabric manufacture in Europe, particularly in Lucca, Italy.

Things to notice:
What are the robe's distinguishing features?

1. Style/cut
The robe's long sleeves and fastening on the right bear a lot of resemblance to the drawings on the scattered pages of Mongol-period manuscripts, including the great Mongol *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings). The style can also be found in Chinese manuscripts and art pieces. It appears in Yuan works (Yuan was an older, allied dynasty of the Ilkhans), especially on a *mandala* (Buddhist artistic image used for meditation) done on a *kesi* (silk tapestry) on which Emperor Yuan Togha Temur (1328–1332 CE) and his brother Khoshila were represented. Very rarely was it depicted without an overcoat; this is how it features in mourning scenes, but also on a page of the great Mongol *Shahnameh* housed in the Louvre.

2. Inscription
There is a pseudo-inscription around the large lobed circles. A six-petal rosette is woven into the centre of these wheels in a contrasting greyish-green thread. The pseudo-inscription could indicate an origin from the Iranian coast or Islamic Central Asia, which should be confirmed with a technical analysis.

Object 6:
Porcelain Plate

After 400 years of rule the Mongols fell to the Chinese Ming dynasty, however many Muslim merchant families remained in China. How is east–west trade impacted by the fall of the Mongols and the new ruling dynasty? And who is the plate being produced for?

China, 1506–21
Porcelain

Height 7.5cm; 41.8cm
AKM722

Silk Routes connection

This plate was produced 700 years after porcelain was invented in China and two centuries before it began to be produced in Europe. It is an example of inscribed porcelain made either for Chinese Muslim communities, or for export to other parts of the Islamic world.

Our difficulty in deciding which scenario is correct shows how popular porcelain had become in Asia and Europe by this time. From the Ottomans in Turkey to the Safavids in Iran, and even to the royal courts in Europe, many potters emulated the Chinese style of blue-and-white porcelain.

Context

Muslim merchants from the Middle East and Central Asia settled in China's Fujian province as early as the eighth century and continued to immigrate to various regions in that country after the Mongol invasions. Blue-and-white porcelain wares with Arabic inscriptions, such as the beautiful dish shown here, may have been made either for the Chinese Muslim community or for export to foreign lands.

Ming China (1368-1644 CE) was marked by a period of xenophobia that stood in stark contrast to the great amount of east–west exchange under the Mongol rule of the Yuan emperors (1271-1368 CE). In spite of this, the Ming did allow a certain level of foreign trade, and blue-and-white porcelain wares continued to be coveted by the courts of Iran, Mamluk Egypt and Syria, India, and the Ottoman Empire. This dish may have been produced for an Iranian market, where the taste for Chinese art and *khita'i* (a Chinese-inspired aesthetic) seems to have been most pronounced, but blue-and-white porcelains and other Chinese ceramics were also exported to other parts of the Islamic world by land and by sea, particularly to Indonesia. Blue-and-white Safavid and Ottoman Iznik wares attest to a taste for the Far East, as shown in the efforts made by Islamic potters to emulate Chinese porcelain.

The present object may have come from one of the thousands of kilns around Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province, where several blue-and-white porcelains have been excavated.

Things to notice:
What are the porcelain plate's distinguishing features?

1. Calligraphic inscription on purity
The centre of the dish includes an inscription in cobalt blue of the Arabic word for purity, *taharat*, enclosed first within a circular frame, then within two squares and a larger circle. The interstices of the circles and squares contain blue cloud scrolls and another scroll design that is repeated on the rim of the dish. Four small, square panels appear at regular intervals along the rim and enclose Arabic inscriptions that collectively read, "Blessed is he who purifies his hand from wrongdoing." Six panels arranged in a similar format on the exterior together contain the Arabic inscription, "Ablution upon ablution is light upon light."

2. The stamp of Ming emperor
The six-character reign mark of the Ming emperor Zhengde (ruled 1506–21 CE) has been added to the base of the dish.

Object 7:
Bowl With Man Stabbing a Lion

Previously unseen in Islamic cultural traditions, this bowl marks the beginning of figurative depictions – a new era in Islamic art. With the gates open eastward, within a few centuries the figurative tradition in Iran would begin to resemble that of China. What allowed for this drastic change?

Silk Routes connection

By the 12th century the Silk Routes had become an important source of movement between artistic traditions. Figurative art (depiction of human figures) which was already popularised in China now begins to move towards Iran, allowing for objects like this bowl to become storytellers of famous kings of the past.

In the post-Byzantine world and the early days of Muslim rule, figurative art held strong connotations of iconoclasm. Figures in art pieces were mostly holy in nature – something which Islam took objection to, as in the Qur'an the Arabic term *musawwir* ('maker of forms' or artist) is seen as an adjective for God, reinforcing the belief that the creation of living forms is unique to God. It is for this reason that the role of images and image makers has been controversial. Yet, evidently by the 12th century the world context had changed. At this point Islam had spread and iconoclasm was a long forgotten phenomenon. Additionally, the conquering of new lands and passage through the Silk Routes allowed for the spread of new and innovative figurative traditions of art.

Iran, 1100
Ceramic

Height 7.5cm; 22.2cm
AKM758

Context

The 12th century in Iran saw the development of a style of ceramics in which figuration, previously unexplored in Islamic art, plays a vital role signalling a new area of artistic development. Among the techniques employed, the pieces known as 'silhouette ware' stand out for their highly contrasting two-colour scheme.

This bowl is one of the most attractive in the group of silhouette ware: the surface is fully occupied by a human figure riding on the back of a lion. He has drawn his dagger from its sheath and is preparing to use it. The strangeness of the scene invites a literary approach to its interpretation. This is probably an image of Bahram Gur, the famous 15th *shah* (king) of Sassanian Persia. According to the *Shahnameh*, the famous Persian epic poem detailing the history of Iran from ancient times to the rise of Islam, Bahram Gur was believed to have won over his critics and the title of King of Persia through battling two lions, between whom was placed a royal crown and robes. It was stated that whoever retrieved the crown and robes would be king, and so Bahram won the title. Stories of his victory continue to abound in Iranian folklore.

In this image, however, he takes the role of the king who is master of himself, worthy of exercising his royal function because he has overcome his own passions, which are embodied in the lion. With this interpretation in mind, we cannot be dealing with a specific episode of the Bahram Gur legend here; instead this is almost a representation of the ideal sovereign, based on a celebrated, highly recognisable literary and moral figure.

Things to notice:
What are the plate's distinguishing features?

1. Image of the lion
Asiatic lions were found in Persia, Mesopotamia and India. They are slightly smaller than African lions and have less pronounced mane growth in males. Today they exist only in western Gujarat and in Palestine.

2. Circle border of flowers and leaves
Rich, luxuriant flora form a delicate circle around the animal, separating it from the scallop shapes that border the rim. Using limited means the artist depicts the action vividly, giving it a lifelike quality that derives partly from the use of three-quarter profile and partly from the border surrounding the scene. The effect is intrinsically pictorial, even though we no longer understand entirely what the scene is intended to convey.

Object 8:
Blue-and-White Dish

After almost 800 years of Chinese porcelain being exported and sold in Muslim lands, why were Muslim artisans creating 'imitation' pieces?

Iran, 17th century
Fritware, underglaze-painted

46.6cm
AKM588

Silk Routes connection

Chinese blue-and-white porcelain began to spread along the Silk Routes very soon after its invention. Eventually, Muslim civilisations began to create their own porcelain objects. This dish is an Iranian copy of one made in China 200 years previously.

This work of 'faithful copying' tells of a long-standing appreciation for Chinese porcelain and art in the Islamic world, and of the interaction between the two artistic traditions, through their artisans, during the Mongol times.

Context

Since the ninth century, the Islamic world had observed and admired the production of Chinese potters. This type of dish dates back to the beginning of the 15th century and has been copied many times. No fewer than 34 similar dishes are still to be found among the collections of the Ardebil sanctuary, the founding site of the Safavid dynasty. The dish is decorated with waves and rocks, and cavettos with small bouquets of flowers, and is similar to others found in the Ardebil collection. It is unusual for an imitation to be so faithful to the original. It copies almost detail for detail the decoration of waves and rocks and the bouquets, but the dish is bigger than the Chinese examples that have been preserved.

Some of the dishes in the Aredbil collection bear the mark of Shah Abbas, which leads us to date this dish back to the early 17th century. It is interesting that the Chinese model probably goes back to the beginning of the 15th century.

The Ottoman world also liked Chinese ceramics; the Topkapi Palace holds one of the most extensive collections of Chinese ceramics outside China.

Things to notice:
What are the porcelain plate's distinguishing features?

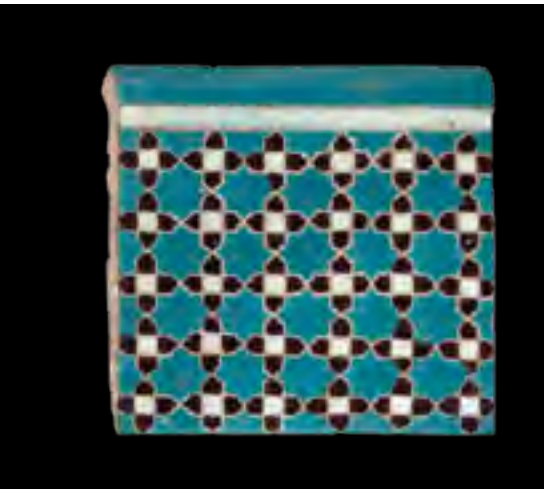
1. Wave design
On the Chinese original, the curly lines of the waves remain fluid, though repetitive. By contrast, on the Safavid model, the waves fold up into geometrically organised bands.

2. Centre bouquet
The centre bouquet copies the Chinese model almost down to the minutest detail. However, the excessive colour on the petals has disappeared. On the underside, the foliage and flowers from the Chinese model have been simplified.

3. Glazing
The thick, oily and shiny glaze spread over the ceramic body lends warmth to the copy.

Object 9:
Tile

At a time when the Silk Routes were believed to be at the beginning of their decline, this tile from a famous mausoleum reflects all the traditions and cultures that had passed through the routes up to this point. It is an example of a series of art techniques brought to Central Asia from the west, but just where had these styles of art come from?



Central Asia, 19th century
Carved and glazed terracotta

32 x 32cm
AKM577

Silk Routes connection

In the 13th century, the Mongols began to divide their land into separate areas called 'khanates' for each ruler. These khanates were military states located around the Silk Routes. Although their presence disrupted the unified management of trade, their openness to different cultures and appreciation for the arts is demonstrated in the mix of techniques from Italy to Iran present in this Central Asian tile.

Timurid tile work is some of the finest Islamic tile work ever created. Timur (ruled 1370–1405 CE) and his successors were fierce rulers but also grand patrons of the arts. Monumental buildings demanded extraordinary decoration. The brilliant turquoise domes and elaborately patterned façades of Timurid buildings are a familiar sight in cities such as Samarqand.

Context

Originally nomadic, the Turko-Mongol Timurid rulers trace their ancestry to Genghis Khan's Mongol army. Adopting Islam, they also adopted the Persian dominated culture of the time, including Persian artistic traditions. The rulers, particularly Timur, conquered lands from Persia to India, with the capitals being Samarqand and Herat in Central Asia. Eventually the dynasty lost its hold over Persia and the famous King Babur of the Timur family established the Mughal dynasty that reigned over Central Asia and India until the 19th century.

Timurid artwork used a range of techniques which had travelled along the Silk Routes from all parts of the Islamic world, demonstrating the highly skilled and cosmopolitan nature of the craftsmen. These techniques included:

- *banna'i*, glazed brick patterns, originating in Syria and Iraq
- carved and glazed terracotta, like this tile, a technique from Iran though also popular in Italy and Greece
- tile mosaic made popular and developed in Iran after glazed terracotta
- *cuerda seca* (dry cord to create a black outline) from Iran
- underglaze painted relief moulding, a technique of the Roman Empire, popular in Italy
- lustre, a thin coating of unoxidised metal which gives a shiny glaze to ceramics – very prominent in Europe, particularly Italy in the 14th century

This tile panel may have been affixed to the exterior façade of a mosque or mausoleum in the Shah-i-Zinda (meaning 'The Living King') complex at Samarqand. This complex took nine centuries to complete and includes more than 20 buildings devoted to memorialising dead rulers and kings.

Things to notice:
What are the tile's distinguishing features?

1. Tile pattern – infinite geometric patterns
Notice the way the pattern seems to hypnotise you in the way it repeats, seemingly forever. This repeating geometrical pattern became a prominent technique of Islamic art. The first forms were seen in Roman Syria, but the technique became highly developed by the 12th and 13th centuries in Islamic Spain and North Africa. A famous example is the Alhambra in Granada, south Spain. There, entire walls of tessellated patterns were erected in one of the grandest palaces in Islamic history. The technique is believed to have been popularised partly due to its symbolic meaning, reminding us of infinity. The repeating patterns give the impression of a single object (the shape) having become immersed in a larger pattern, a concept important in the Islamic ideal of 'oneness or unity of God.'

2. Turquoise colour
The brilliant turquoise domes and elaborately patterned façades of Timurid buildings are a familiar sight in cities such as Samarqand, characteristic of the Central Asian rulers. Turquoise stones are one of the main gem exports of Central Asia.

Object 10:
Folio from a *Shahnameh*: Shah Kay Kavus Attempts to Fly to Heaven

The Book of Kings, also referenced in object 7, is central to Persian culture and identity, as well as Zoroastrian and Sassanian cultural tradition. Why would Turkic Mongol rulers take such care to produce the first great illustrated versions of this famous Persian tale?

Iran, 1341
Opaque watercolour, gold and ink on paper

AKM30

Silk Routes connection

In one of the most densely illustrated copies of the *Shahnameh*, the Inju Mongol rulers of Persia proved themselves to be great patrons of the arts, like their counterparts in Central Asia, the Timurids. In the 14th century, the Turkic Mongols invaded Baghdad and took control of the Abbasid state and the Silk Routes. Once in power they adopted many Islamic and Persian courtly traditions and were greatly interested in Persian literature. It was at this time that the first known illustrated copies of the *Shahnameh* appeared.

With the Mongols beginning to regenerate and revive political power based out of Persia, it seems logical that they would become patrons of the production of grand manuscripts of the epic central to Persian identity. It was necessary for them to engage in this literary patronage to assimilate into the Persio-Islamic courtly culture of the time.

Context

The *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings) is an epic poem of 50,000 verses written by Ferdowsi in the late 10th century, detailing the history of Persia from the creation of the world until the Islamic conquest of Persia in the seventh century. This painting belongs to a dispersed manuscript which was produced in 741AH/1341 CE, and is one of three well-known and densely-illustrated *Shahnameh* manuscripts made for the court environment of Inju Shiraz, a Mongol dynasty like the Timurids ruling in the Iranian province of Fars.

This particular story describes the gullible Shah Kay Kavus, who was tempted by a demon to pursue a preposterous and dangerous plan – to fly to heaven and conquer the secrets of the celestial spheres. Having considered his options, the king proceeded as follows: he ordered his servants to collect live eagle chicks and hand-rear them in the palace on fresh meat. Once fully grown, the tame eagles were formidable, "as strong as lions", and Kavus then ordered his servants to harness four of the birds to a specially-constructed throne, with slabs of raw meat suspended just above the eagles.

Next, the foolish king sat in his contraption, and the straining eagles soon had him airborne as they struggled to reach the dangling food. This is the moment depicted here: hoisted away by the giant birds, Kay Kavus points up in excitement towards the approaching heavens where the first sphere of the fixed stars or constellations may be seen, with the sun beyond. Eventually, of course, the birds grew tired, and the king's upward trajectory came to an end. The plummeting throne crashed to the ground, tipping out the royal passenger in a remote region. He survived the failed adventure but was greatly humiliated by the contemptuous reproaches of his noblemen when they came to rescue him.

Things to notice:
What are the distinguishing features?

1. Illustration
Notice the rich colours and detailed descriptions present in this manuscript, one of the grandest versions of this famous tale of which many versions appear throughout history.

2. Colophon statement (not visible on this page)
Like many valuable manuscripts handled by western art dealers in the early 20th century, this *Shahnameh* codex was taken apart and sold page by page on the art market, scattering the folios to public and private collections around the world. Remarkably, even as pages of manuscript were scattered, the dedication pages and the final page containing the colophon statement survived. The colophon statement indicated the date of publishing, the calligrapher and for whom the text was created. Thus, we know the manuscript was made for the Inju *wazir* (minister) Hajji Qawam al-Dawla wal-I-Din Hasan, and the calligrapher was Hasan ibn Muhammad ibn Ali ibn Husayni al-Mawsili. (Note: *ibn* in Arabic means 'son of.')

Object 11:
Manuscript of Al-Kashifi's *Anvar-i Suhayli* (Lights of Canopus)

Lights of Canopus is a 15th-century Persian re-writing of a 12th-century Arabic story called *Kalila wa Dimna*, which itself is a re-naming of a 3rd-century Sanskrit tale from India. How did a story from the Indian oral tradition in 300 CE make it to Iran more than a thousand years later?

Iran, 1593
Ink and opaque watercolour on paper

30.1cm x 20.3cm
AKM289

Silk Routes connection

Most of the objects in this collection have told the story of some kind of borrowing of an artistic style, tradition or technique from one culture to another. Similarly, this manuscript represents a fable about statecraft that originated in India around 300 CE. By the 15th century, this story had made its way into Persian and Arabic culture.

This manuscript from the Safavid period in Iran was produced by a dynasty in close contact with Europeans and may have been the means through which the fables were introduced to Europe.

Context

The *Anvar-i Suhayli* (Lights of Canopus) is a selection of 15th-century fables based on a 12th-century version of the famous *Kalila and Dimna* collection.

The origins of the text are thought to lie in the oral traditions of India and to have been first recorded in writing around 300 CE as the *Panchatantra* (Five Occasions of Good Sense), a book of five chapters on statecraft. The stories are all very different but are held together by five main fables and the structure of an Indian king having a conversation with his court philosopher. The Indian king, Dabshalim, consults his philosopher Bidpai about proper ruling conduct in a variety of situations. Bidpai responds to each question with a fable featuring animal protagonists.

The history of the *Panchatantra's* transmission to the Islamic world is told through its various adaptations and translations into Persian and Arabic. For example, the story of *Kalila wa Dimna* was first translated into Pahlavi or Middle Persian by the physician Burzoy in the 6th century; then into Arabic in the 8th century by Ibn al-Muqaffa; later into neo-Persian in the mid-12th century by Nasrallah Munshi; and, finally, at the end of the 15th century, incorporated into the *Anvar-i Suhayli* by Husayn ibn 'Ali al Wa'iz al-Kashifi. This long history of translations is telling of the popularity and relevance of the tales in many cultures.

Things to notice:
What are the distinguishing features?

1. Number and size of illustrations
This manuscript of fables contains 107 illustrations.

2. Variety of names and languages
Under the names *Panchatantra*, *Kalila wa Dimna*, *The Moral Philosophy of Don*, *Anvar-i Suhayli* (Lights of Canopus) and many more, this story travelled from oral tellings in India to written manuscripts in Europe over 1,500 years and across the Silk Routes. By 1600 it existed in Greek, Latin, Spanish, Italian, German, English, Old Slavonic, Czech and perhaps other European languages. As the stories made their way along the Silk Routes, names of characters were changed to reflect local culture. For example, Bipai is also known as Pilpay and Bindna.

Recording grid

Treasures of the Silk Routes	Location and Date Where is it from? Which time period?	Description What do we know about the object's connection to the Silk Routes?	Observations What is unique about the object?
Object 1: Bifolium from the Blue Qur'an			
Object 2: Folio from the Qarmathian Qur'an			
Object 3: Folio from the *Manafi' al-Hayawan*: 'Shiqraq' (Green Magpie)			
Object 4: Robe			
Object 5: Robe			
Object 6: Porcelain Plate			
Object 7: Bowl With Man Stabbing a Lion			
Object 8: Blue-and-White Dish			
Object 9: Tile			
Object 10: Folio from a *Shahnameh*			
Object 11: Manuscript of Al- Kashifi's *Anvar-i Suhayli* (Lights of Canopus)			

Assessment: Reflection

Now that you have completed the recording grid and learnt about the cultural and artistic exchange along the Silk Routes, answer the following questions:

1. Which objects showed the most exchange between cultures? Why?

2. Which factors made it difficult to gain a complete picture about an object's history?

3. What have you learnt about the society of the time? What makes this period of the Silk Routes' history different from other periods?

4. Write about the object you liked most. Why did you like it? Does it relate to something that exists in your life today?

5. Can you think of a modern equivalent of the cultural exchange along the Silk Routes?

Notes

Notes

The Aga Khan Academies
www.agakhanacademies.org