ART INSTITUTE UNVEILS NEW GALLERIES TO SHOWCASE ISLAMIC ART
Permanent Collection Is Back on Display for First Time Since 2012

A dazzling array of works of art from the vast Islamic world is now on display at the Art Institute of Chicago in the museum’s newly transformed galleries for Islamic art.

The meticulously designed 3,200 square-foot space, on the lower level just off the Alsdorf Galleries, showcases the museum’s collection of Islamic Art, which has been off view since February 2012. The exhibition brings together more than 100 items ranging from small tiles and utensils to large architectural objects. Selections from the museum’s own holdings are augmented by important pieces on loan from public and private collections, and rotating presentations of Islamic painting, calligraphy, textiles, and carpets supplement the items on permanent display.

“I believe visitors will be astonished by the high quality and creative energy found in this assortment of objects from across the full span of the Islamic world, from Spain and Morocco to Central Asia and Indonesia,” said Daniel Walker, Christa C. Mayer Thurman Chair and Curator of the Department of Textiles and the Curator of Islamic Art.
The Islamic world often is defined as those countries governed by a Muslim authority or populated by a Muslim majority, although Muslims live in many more countries than those identified specifically as Islamic. When talking about Islamic art, the reference is usually cultural, rather than religious. And although much Islamic art is informed in some way by religion, most of the works are secular in nature.

Islamic art emphasizes surface pattern and decoration over form, due to the rejection of icons – images of devotion – in Islam and the general practice of some early Muslim rulers to avoid figural representations. Within Islamic decoration, there are four main categories: calligraphy, geometric patterns, vegetal or plant-based patterns, and human and animal figures.

The core of the Art Institute exhibition is a series of wall cases containing themed groupings of works. The first has a selection of key objects from different cultures and time periods, introducing visitors to the history, religion, and artistic traditions of Islam. From there, the presentation proceeds both chronologically and geographically, with displays that contain, for example, early and medieval objects covering the full expanse of the early Islamic world in one section, while another section features the later great empires of Ottoman Turkey, Safavid Iran, and Mughal India. The groupings enable viewers to see the common threads that connect the art of the region.

One display focuses on an especially rich area of the collection: art produced under the Mongols in Iran between the mid-13th and mid-14th centuries. Multiple themes are developed across sections, such as Islamic ornaments with the familiar arabesque pattern, the art of the book, and the surprisingly widespread use of figural decoration.

Visitors will notice an emphasis on architecture and architectural fragments that help illustrate the complex story of Islamic cultural production and lend scale to the presentation. High ceilings and a newly constructed arched wall enable the presentation of unusually large objects. Examples
include a pair of 12-foot-tall wooden doors from 14th century Morocco, a group of large wooden beams, also from Morocco, and 13-foot-wide tiled spandrels from Iran.

Several of the museum’s recent calligraphy acquisitions will be on display for the first time. Two contiguous pages from a Qur’an manuscript from the late 12th or 13th century present a variety of colored inks on vivid pink paper. A page from an important tract by one of the most renowned theologians of Islam, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, is notable for the geometric clarity and simplicity of its illumination. And a large leaf of a Qur’an produced in Syria or Egypt in the 14th century is one of only a handful of known single leaves from the manuscript.

Images:

Two Tiles with continuous floral pattern, c. 1560. Turkey, Iznik. The Art Institute of Chicago. Mary Jane Gunsaulus Collection.

The Ascent of the Prophet to Heaven, page from the copy of the Khamsa of Nizami, c. 1600. Iran. The Art Institute of Chicago. Lucy Maud Buckingham Collection.

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