



Foreword

• JAN DE HOND •

Over the last few years there has been renewed worldwide interest in Islamic art. Several spectacular new museums of Islamic art have recently opened in such places as Doha and Toronto. The most important departments of Islamic art in large museums like the British Museum, the Victoria & Albert Museum, the Louvre and the Metropolitan Museum have recently been completely renovated or are currently being reorganized. In the Netherlands there is no museum with a separate Islamic art department, let alone one exclusively devoted to it. The only museums in this country that focus on the culture of the Islamic world are ethnographic museums such as the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam and the Museum voor Volkenkunde in Leiden. Islamic art is distributed among many very different museums which do not devote special attention to it in their presentations. At the same time, the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam, with its very successful temporary exhibitions like *Morocco*, *Oman*, *Istanbul* and *Passion for Perfection* (Kalili collections), has shown that there really is an interest in Islamic art and culture in the Netherlands. The almost total absence of Islamic art in museum exhibits has therefore given rise to a good deal of discussion over the last few years. Should there not also be a permanent place in the Netherlands that concen-



Fig. 1
Nimcha belonging to M.A. de Ruyter, Algeria, c. 1650. Iron, copper, silver, tortoiseshell, mother of pearl, enamel, wood, leather, worsted, velvet, l. 67 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, NG-NM-10412.

Detail of fig. 1

trates on Islamic art and culture, and what should it be: a separate museum, an individual pavilion or department, or somewhere where it is shown alongside and in relation to other art?

As a result of these discussions the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam will be showing its collection of Islamic art in an exhibition in the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden. *Trade Goods and Souvenirs. Islamic Art from the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam* runs from 20 April to 4 September 2011. Even though the Rijksmuseum is certainly not able to put on an overview of developments in Islamic art, it does have some extraordinary collections and a few unique items, among them rare fragments of fabrics from Medieval Iran, Egypt and Spain, a fourteenth-century Mamluk water basin made in Damascus for a Sicilian queen and some rare Egyptian and Iranian carpets from the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Islamic art has never been a focus of the museum's collection policy. Many of these items have ended up in the collection more or less by chance. Much of the Islamic art in the Rijksmuseum is directly linked to the historical relationships between the Netherlands and the Islamic countries bordering the Mediterranean. As long ago as the seventeenth century the Dutch Republic was a major importer of Oriental carpets, which were par-

ticularly popular in Dutch houses. The Rijksmuseum also has several Turkish and North African letter cases once owned by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutch diplomats, and some splendid weapons which the naval heroes Michiel de Ruyter and Cornelis Tromp brought back with them from Algeria as gifts or souvenirs (fig. 1). Another part of the Islamic collection, the Islamic ceramics and fabric fragments, was purchased around 1900 when for a time there was a desire to build up a larger collection of Islamic art. At that time Islamic ornaments and ceramics were being reassessed in the West and collected to serve as examples for western designers to raise the standard of decorative art in Europe. In the second half of the twentieth century the museum purchased almost no individual pieces of Islamic art, apart from a few carpets. But two larger collections were acquired in their entirety at that time: the collection of Oriental carpets donated by G.W. van Aardenne (1975) and the collection of Islamic ceramics presented by J.A. Oosterbaan and R.C. Oosterbaan-Lugt (1981-2000).

The exhibition in Leiden features many works that have not been on display for a long time. The exhibition is the result of the rediscovery of this part of the Rijksmuseum Collection and also an initiative to commence

further research. The initial results are being presented in this issue of *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin*. Jan de Hond and Luitgard Mols researched Elizabeth of Carinthia's water basin as an example of Mamluk metalwork, and placed it in the context of the artistic interaction between the Islamic and Christian countries bordering the Mediterranean in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and more specifically in the context of fourteenth-century Sicily. The links between the Netherlands and the Islamic world are discussed in the articles by Eveline Sint Nicolaas and Jef Teske. Sint Nicolaas examines a group of portraits of Ottoman courtiers from the collection of Cornelis Calkoen, the ambassador of the Dutch Republic in Istanbul (1726-44); Teske describes a number of embroidered letter cases made in Istanbul and North Africa that belonged to Dutch diplomats and merchants in the Ottoman Empire. Artistic exchange is also at the heart of Agnita van 't Klooster's article; this time, however, it is not the exchange between the Islamic world and the West, but between the Islamic world and the Far East. On the basis of a number of examples of ceramics from the Oosterbaan Collection she shows how great the influence of Chinese ceramics was on the ceramics from Iran and vice versa. This *Bulletin* ends with a piece by Friedrich Spuhler, former

curator of the Museum für Islamische Kunst in Berlin and an internationally recognized specialist in Islamic carpets and textiles. He sheds light on a number of unique items from probably the most valuable collection of Islamic art in the Rijksmuseum – the Oriental carpets. Spuhler returns to his old love and discusses four rare ‘Polish carpets’.

Last but not least a word about the term ‘Islamic art’. It is generally used in art history, but it is actually most unfortunate.¹ It suggests, after all, that this art is religious, but that is by no means always the case. Many of the objects that are generally labelled ‘Islamic art’, ceramics for example, are unquestionably secular. Strictly speaking, we often do not know for certain whether they were actually made by Muslims or by members of the Christian, Jewish or other minority groups.

In practice the term ‘Islamic art’ in art history has more of a regional and

cultural significance, encompassing the art made in the early large Islamic empires and cultures: roughly from Moorish Spain and Morocco to North India. Even though huge regional differences existed within this enormous area, there was actually a cultural uniformity, certainly at the level of the culture of the court and the urban elite. Islam as the dominant religion and Arabic as the common sacred language were important unifying factors. The huge classical empires, such as the Umayyad, the Abbasid and later the Ottoman Empire, also brought a certain degree of cultural and artistic uniformity as well as political unity. People, ideas and artistic trends moved remarkably quickly and easily between different cultural centres, so that there was certainly ‘unity in diversity’ at the level of court culture in the Islamic world. In this issue we therefore use a regional and cultural definition of Islamic art, not a religious one.

NOTE

-
- 1 For an account of the recent debate about the term ‘Islamic art’, see Mirjam Shatanawi, *Islam in beeld: kunst en cultuur van moslims wereldwijd*, Amsterdam 2009.