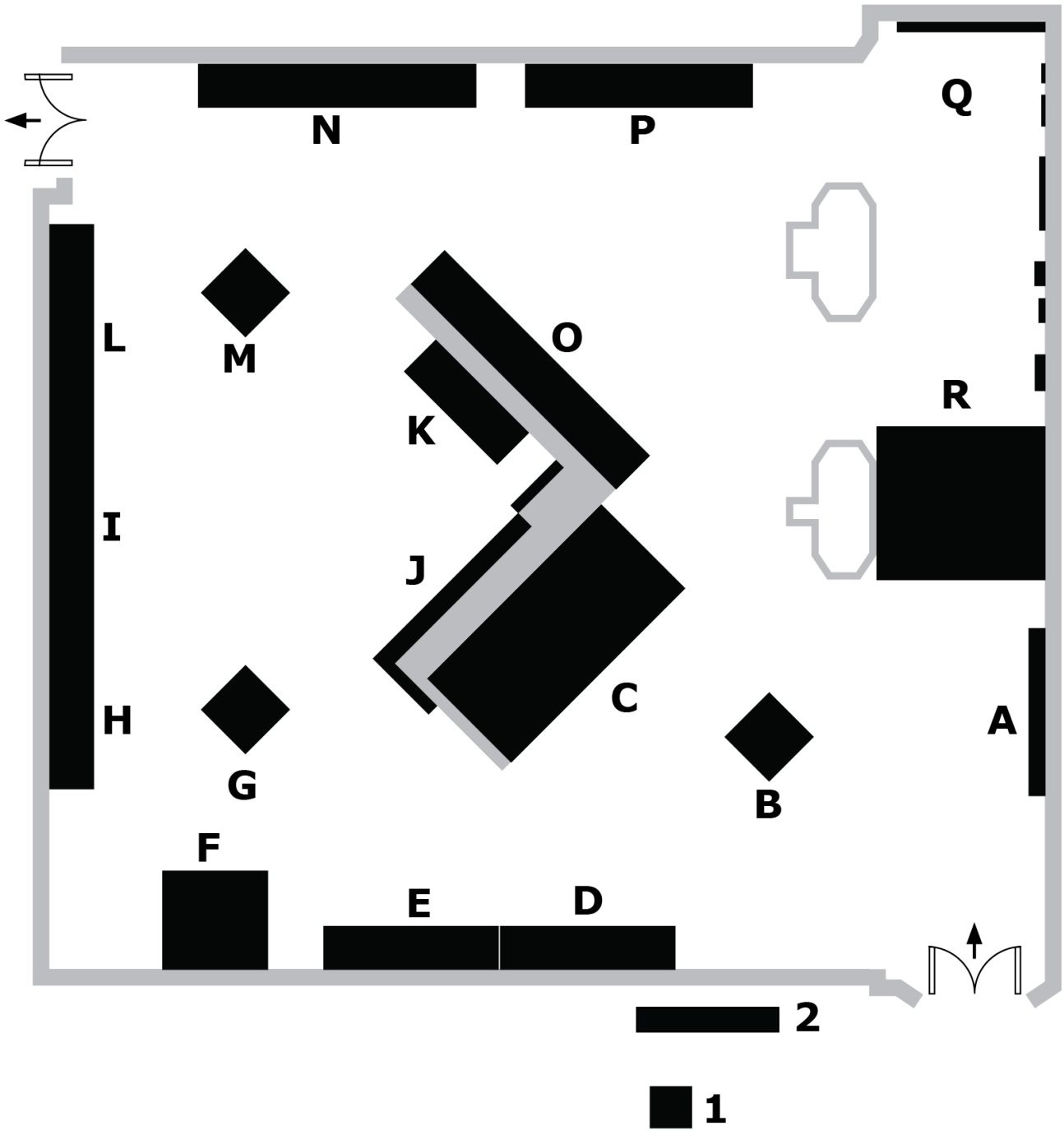
Large Print Guide
Please return after use

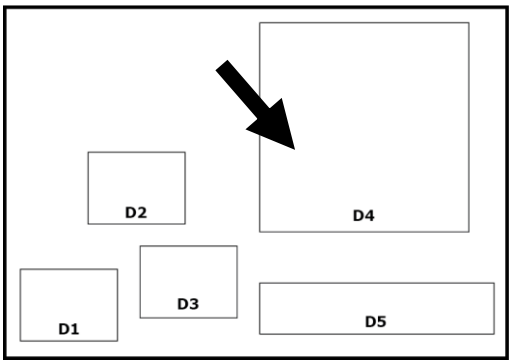
Islamic Art

Level 2
Permanent Galleries
Faith & Belief

Floorplan of Gallery and User Guide



How to read display case and floorplans



D4

To find object label text, match D4 to D4, then D5 to D5, and so on.

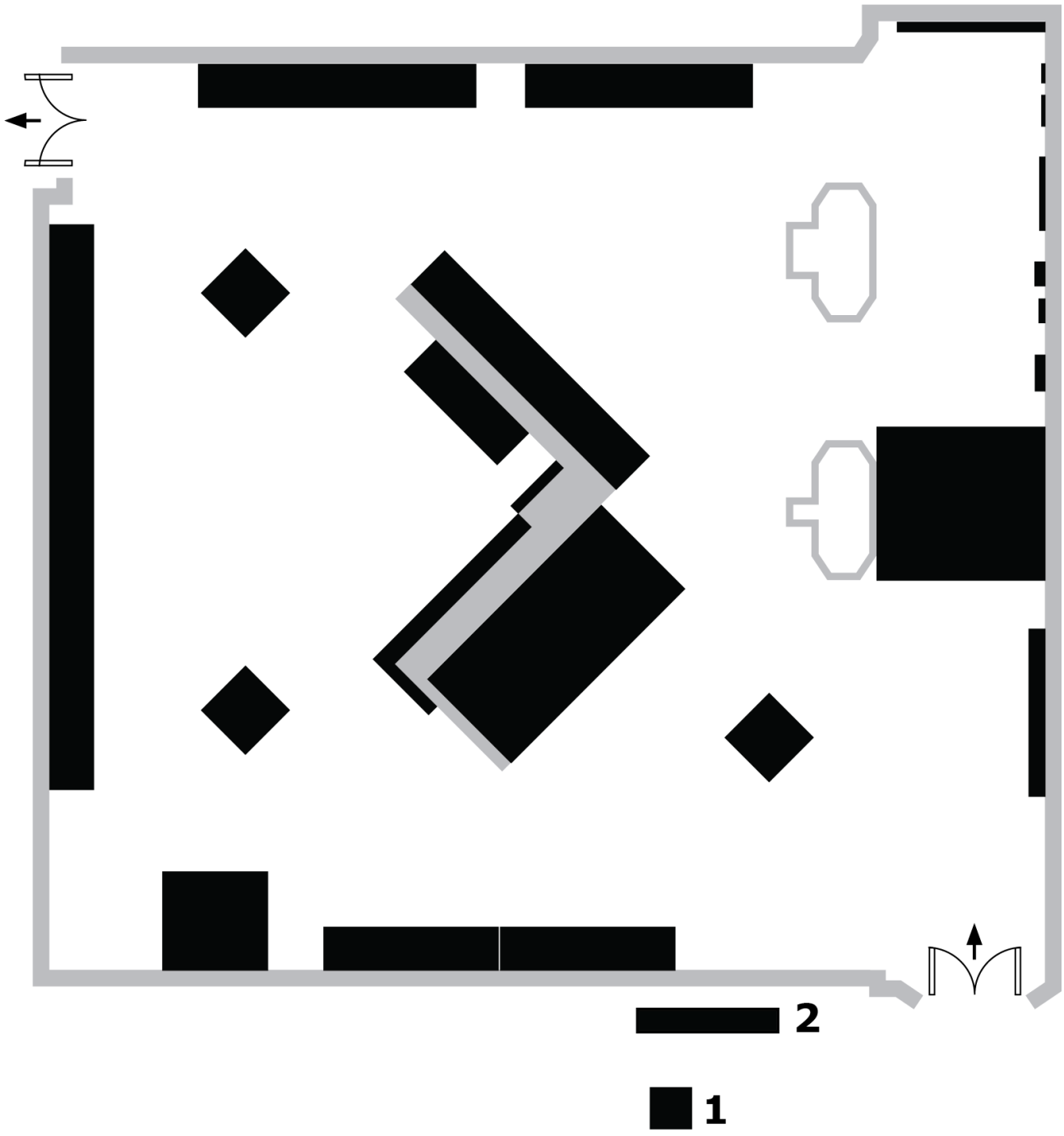
D4

Calligraphic batik

Sumatra, Jambi, 20th century

Cotton, dyes

2009-02990


2
1

Open display (outside of gallery)

1

BEFORE ISLAM

These two sculptures represent older artistic traditions in places where Islam now prevails. When a new faith takes hold, does a community break completely with its existing art and culture? Or are earlier traditions modified, even re-invented? The adjacent Islamic Art gallery explores these questions as it surveys the development of art forms born out of a new way of life.

1.1

Head of a man

Southern Arabia, 1st century BC or 1st century AD

Calcite-alabaster

2013-00581

At the time of Islam’s emergence, tribes and kingdoms populated Arabia, and Judaism and Christianity were among the faiths practised. This finely sculpted head represents another major, much older faith – local polytheistic beliefs, which were still practised in Mecca at the time of Prophet Muhammad’s birth.

This head was most likely part of a marker for a family tomb. Bluish traces in the right eye suggest that the recesses were possibly filled, like other figures of the period, with lapis lazuli. At the time, lapis lazuli, a prized rock from which the most brilliant blues are made, had to be imported from

present-day northeast Afghanistan.

1.2

Seated deity

Eastern Java, late 10th or early 11th century

Bronze

2014-00586

Nearer to us, Islam was established in Java around the 13th or 14th century. When it arrived, the region was heavily influenced by Hindu-Buddhist traditions.

This bodhisattva image was probably one of several tantric Buddhist deities used in a ritual grouping or mandala. The finely worked, spiky style of modelling is related to a large group of ritual bronzes found in the district of Nganjuk, near Kediri, in eastern Java, so we date it to around the same time period.

2

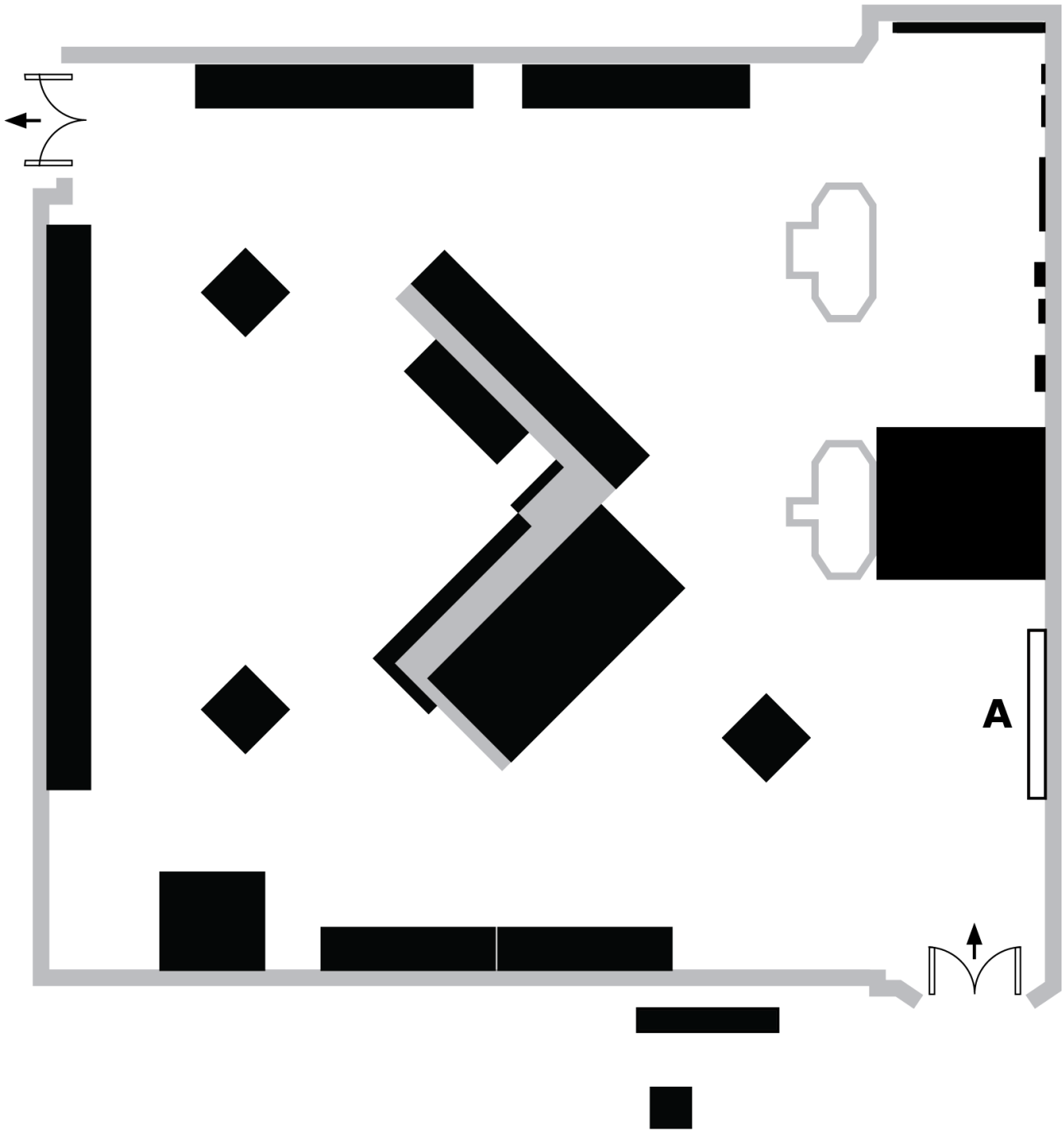
Set of doors

Java, Jepara or Kudus, early 20th century
Wood, pigments, gilding
Inscriptions: top lintel panel: Quran 48:1–2 (Surat al-Fath, The Victory); right: Quran 66:1–4 (Surat at-Tahrim, The Prohibition); left: Quran 22:49–54 (Surat al-Hajj, The Pilgrimage)
1999-00239

These doors would have been part of an elaborate partition, called a gebyog, that separates private areas from social spaces in a traditional Javanese house. Traditionally, the carved reliefs contained Hindu-Buddhist motifs such as the swastika and the lotus flower.

With the advent of Islam, motifs were renewed. The jasmine flower replaced the lotus. Faithfully reproduced verses bearing themes of humility, faith, and following the straight path established the

religious identity and piety of the homeowner. Gebyogs are usually unpainted. These doors were coloured red and gold probably to echo the Islamic tradition of illuminating the Quran as the word of God.


A

A

Calligraphic hanging

Sumatra, 20th century

Cotton (velvet), gilded thread

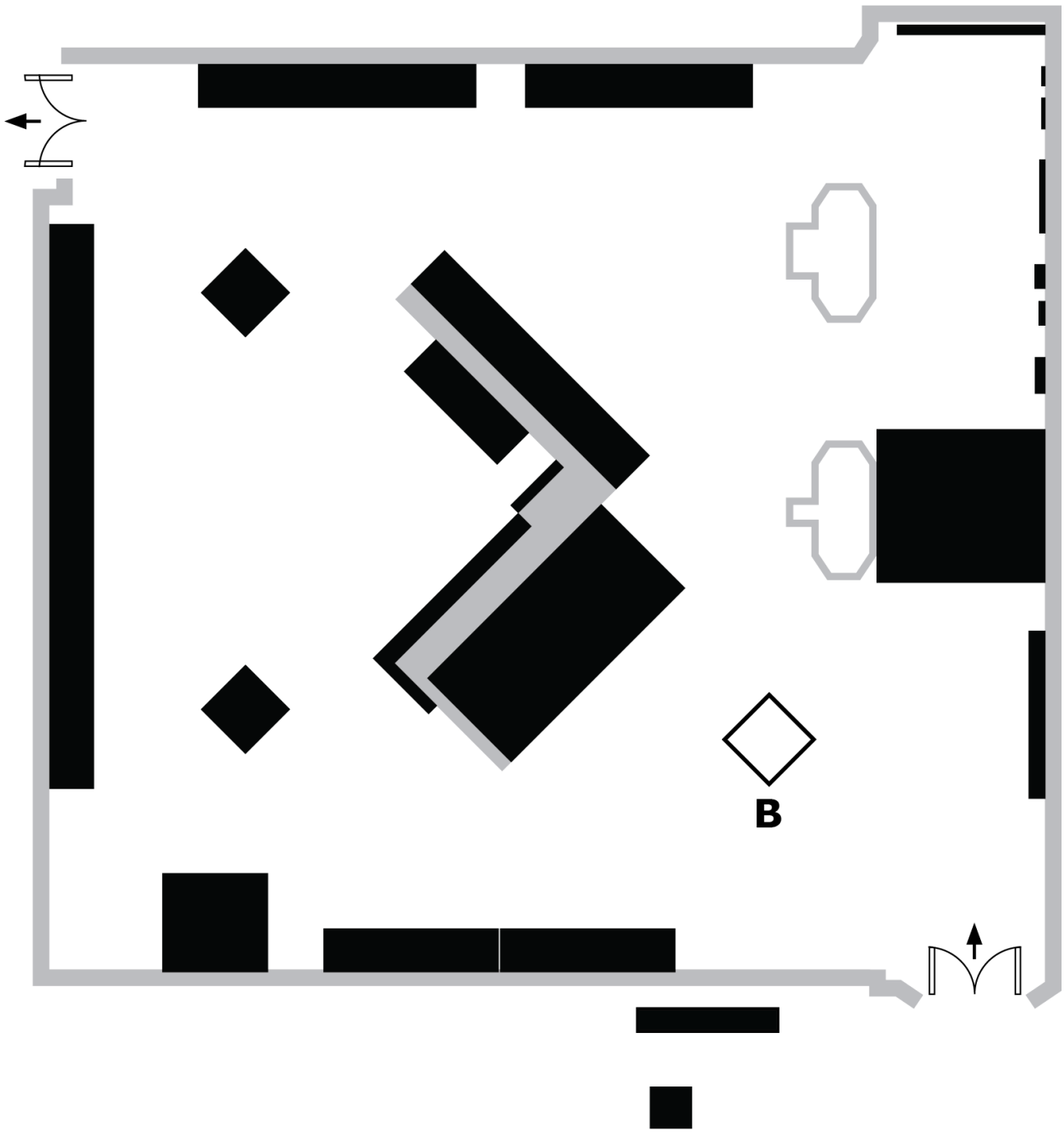
Inscriptions: top panel: Isti'adha; Basmala; Quran 42:19, Surat ash-Shura (The Consultation): each side panel: Khatam an-nubuwwah (Seal of Prophethood); Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, Ali (the Four Rightly Guided Caliphs)

2000-05567

The gold thread embroidery here represents a textile tradition of the Malay world, known as tekat. Traditionally reserved for royal garments and furnishings, tekat textiles are now more widely used, to signify status or special occasions like weddings.

Since there are inscriptions, this probably hung at an entrance to a religious or sacred space. The isti'adha (top right corner), a supplication to seek refuge from the devil, is typically recited before entering a

mosque. The pyramidal calligraphic motif on each side is based on a mark found between the shoulder blades of Prophet Muhammad, known as the Seal of Prophethood. It is sometimes believed that looking upon the motif can bestow divine protection.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B

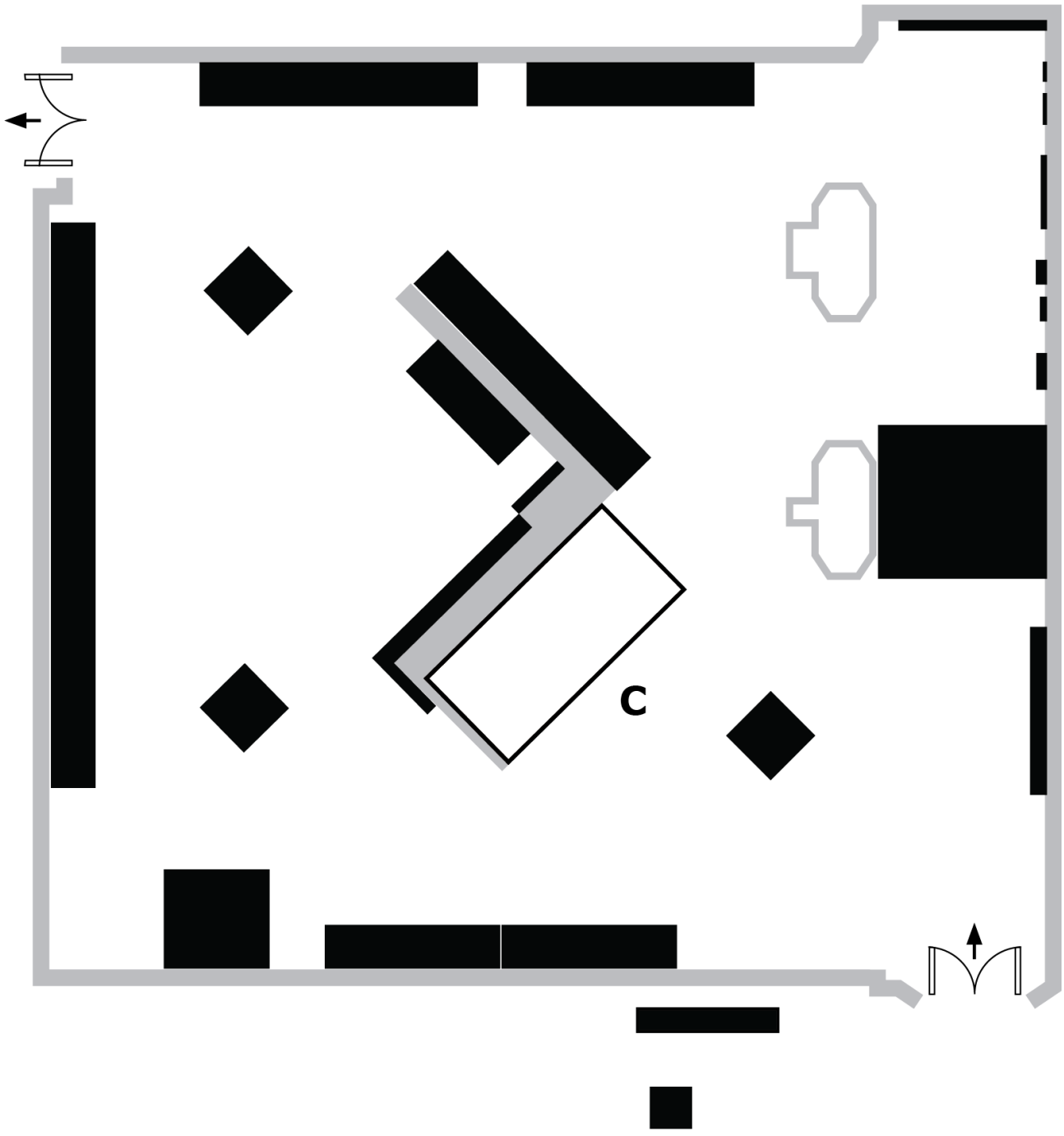
Quran chest

Myanmar, early 20th century
Lacquered wood, glass, metal, gold leaf
Inscriptions: the shahada on each side
1996-02182

The gilded, relief-moulded design with glass inlays is characteristic of a Burmese lacquerware style known as hman-zi shwei. Produced especially in Mandalay, it is technically difficult and expensive. Sized to a Quran folio format, the chest design is probably derived from the longer, rectangular chests used for storing palm-leaf manuscripts of Buddhist scripture.

There are several Muslim communities in Myanmar, including Chinese (known as Panthay), South Asian, and Malay Muslims, whose varied histories include arrivals at different moments before, during, and after the British colonial period (1824–1948). One of the first contacts with Islam took place in the early

15th century, when the king of Arakan, Narameikhla, returned from exile in Bengal with Muslim followers.


C

C

Chest with Quranic inscriptions (grobog)

North-eastern Java, Jepara or Kudus, 19th century

Teakwood, pigments

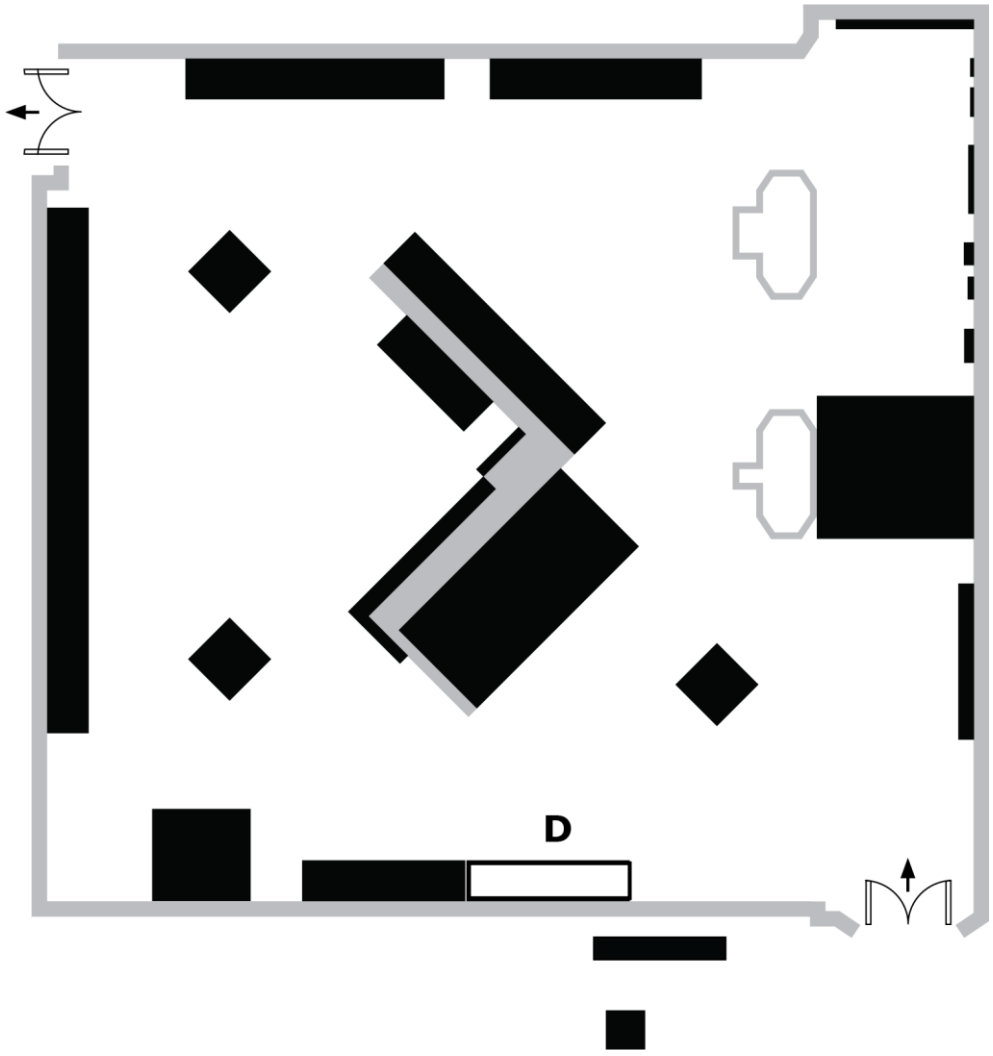
Inscription: Quran 3:9–13, Surat Ali ʻImran (The Family of Imran)

2011-03161

This type of large chest on wheels is usually plain, or decorated only on the front panel. An elaborately carved chest like this one, with decorative panels on the front and sides, as well as for the lid and skirting panels, is rare. Even more uncommon is the calligraphy. Typically, the designs draw on Javanese motifs such as the Tree of Life or the swastika pattern.

The intricate carvings elevate this chest to ceremonial status, and the Quranic inscriptions suggest that it was intended for a religious setting, such as a mosque or a madrasa. In addition to the

verses, there are also inscribed cartouches featuring the shahada (Islamic profession of faith), and the name “Muhammad” is carved as a mirrored form.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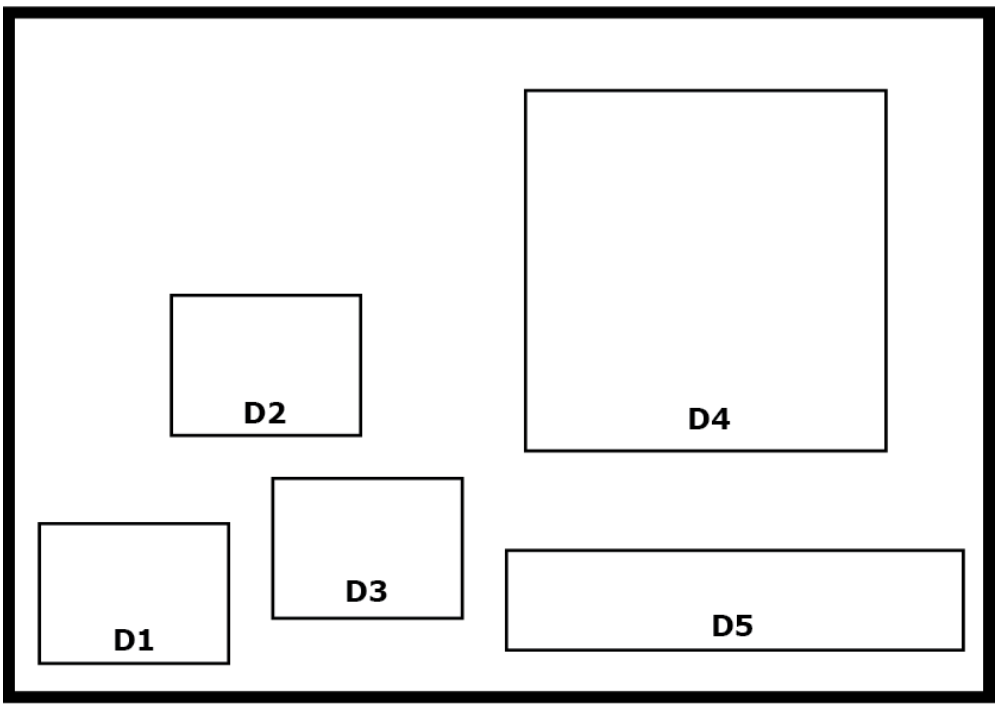
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D1
D5

D

Qurans from Southeast Asia

Illuminated doublespreads are usually found at the beginning and end pages of a Quran. Often in Southeast Asian Qurans, a third doublespread can be found in the middle. The predominant calligraphic script used is a rounded form, generally called Naskh script. While there are features shared with the wider Islamic world, distinct regional styles can be identified. The most outstanding are the styles from Aceh, in northern Sumatra, and along the east coast of the Malay Peninsula.

D1

Quran

Malay Peninsula, Terengganu, 19th century

Paper, ink, coloured and gold pigments, cotton, leather binding

Inscriptions: Quran 1:1–7, Surat al-Fatihah (The Opening Chapter); 2:1–4, Surat al-Baqarah (The Heifer)

2009-01709

Based on its large size and the lavish use of gold, this Quran was probably commissioned for a royal patron. With multiple decorative frames within frames, this “Terengganu style” is dense and elaborate. The primary use of red and yellow (or gold), followed by black, “reserved” white (the natural colour of the paper) and green, is characteristic of Terengganu, and is the preferred colour scheme throughout the region.

D2

Quran

Central Java late 19th or early 20th century

Paper, ink, coloured pigments, leather binding

Inscription: Quran 18:1-4, Surat al-Fatihah (The Cave)

2005-01608-001

In contrast to the Acehnese and Terengganu styles, Javanese illumination exhibits a greater variety of colours and patterns. Blue pigments tend to be more common in Javanese Qurans.

While it is difficult to establish a single Javanese style, the swastika pattern (called banji) is a decorative feature unique to Qurans from the island.

D3

Fragment of a Quran

Sumatra, Aceh, 19th century

Paper, ink, coloured pigments

Inscription: Quran 18:75–79, *(*Surat al-Kahf, The Cave*)*

2010-00811

Like the Terengganu Quran, red, yellow (or gold), and black dominate the illumination designs of Aceh. This more geometric style typically features triangular frames at the top and bottom along one side of the text. Also distinctively Acehnese are the wing-like ornaments that appear as offshoots from both ends of the triangular frame on the side.

D4

Calligraphic batik

Sumatra, Jambi, 20th century

Cotton, dyes

2009-02990

This batik features Arabic inscriptions repeatedly stamped onto the cloth. Each section comprises a central cluster of four calligraphic medallions, from which radiate horizontal and vertical bands of lobed cartouches. The overall design of a central motif surrounded by four satellite motifs is derived from Buddhist mandalas. The cartouche bands, as well as the single cartouches in each quarter-section, contain mirrored writing. Such batiks were used to cover coffins or biers (platform for a coffin).

D5

Syair manuscript

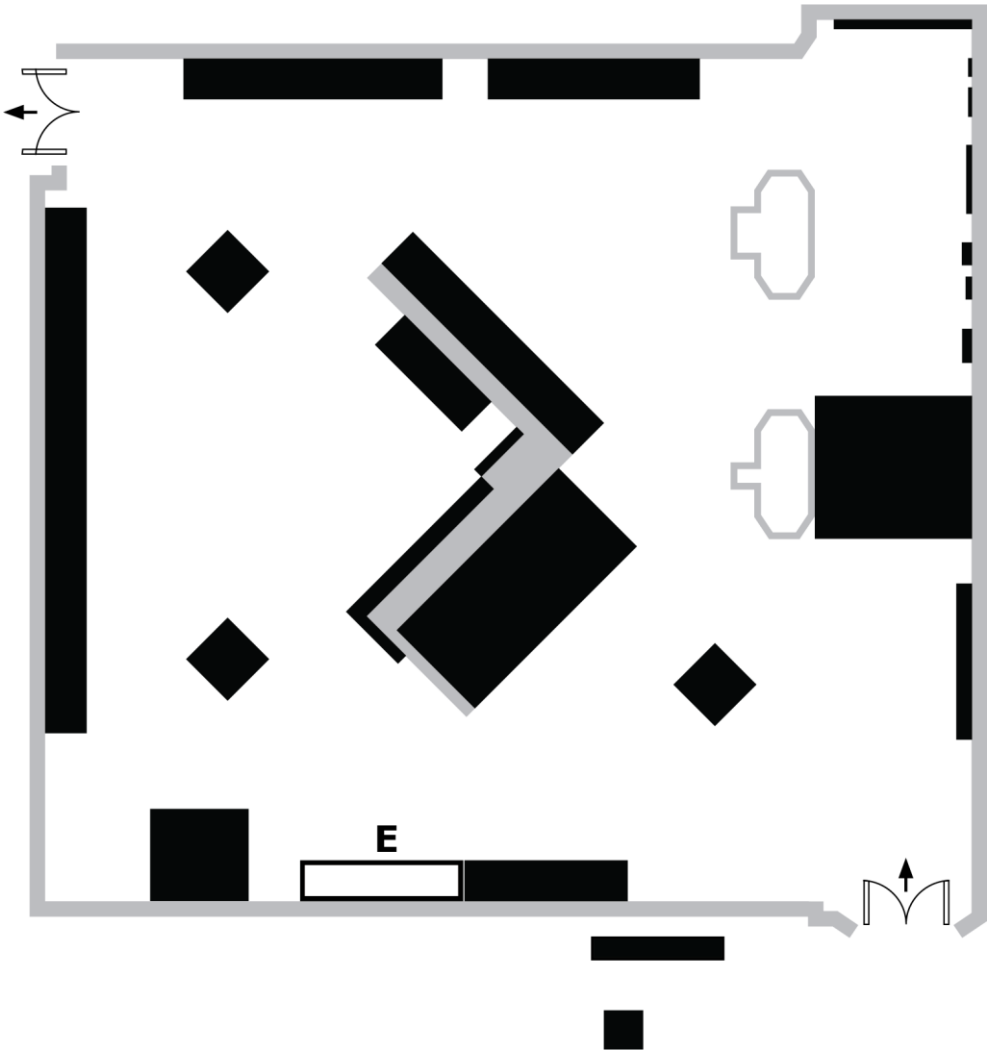
Malay Peninsula, Pattani, dated 1250 AH (AD 1835)

Mulberry paper, charcoal, white steatite

1999-02644

This manuscript, scribed by Bayu bin Dhaman Syah of Patani for Fakir Ramli of Burma, is unusual because of its concertina format (folded, zigzag pages). This type, with blackened pages, is popular mainly in Buddhist Myanmar, where it is known as parabaik.

This parabaik features a collection of three verse poems (syair) containing advice and wisdom for young people. The main poem, Syair Dendang Fatimah (Song of Fatimah), is usually sung to a newborn child in a ceremony called berendoi or naik buai (Malay: "ascending the cradle") still practised today.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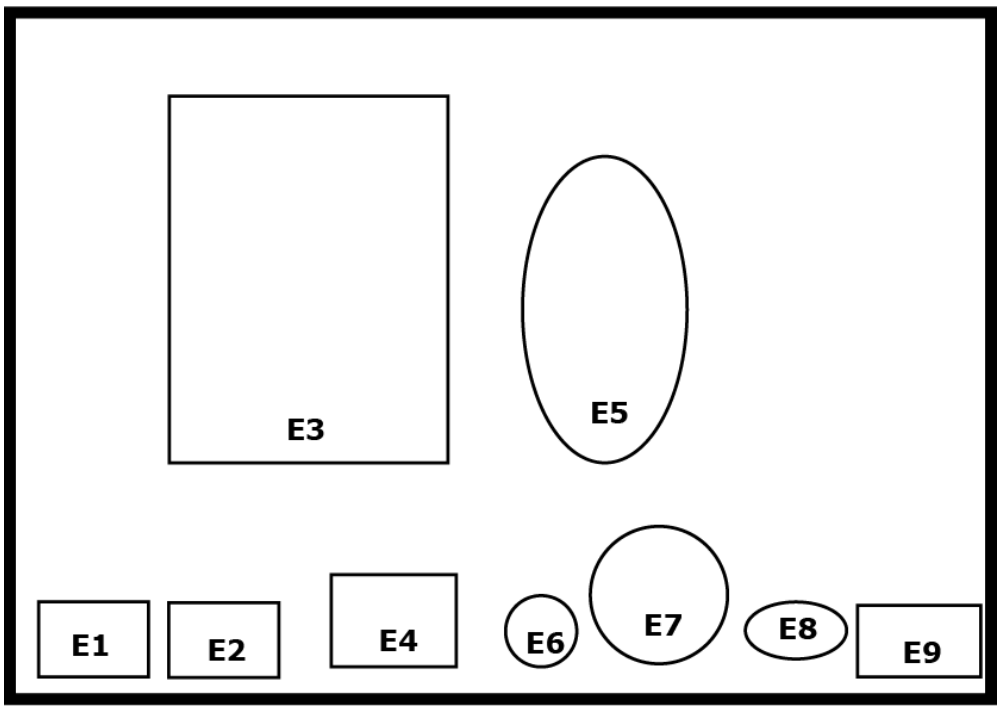
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E1

Haji cap on stand

Indonesia, 19th century

Cotton, wood, pigments, ink

XXXX-11449

E2

Ceremonial hat

Southern Sulawesi, 19th or 20th century

Vegetal fibres, bone, gold thread

Inscription: Muhammad

2008-05879

The two hats represent the development of men's headwear after the advent of Islam. The softer skullcap is typically worn by a haji – one who has completed his pilgrimage. White symbolises purity and recalls the simple, plain ihram cloth that pilgrims must wear throughout the hajj.

The stiffer, black hat is derived from the Middle Eastern fez. The general form of this hat, known as songkok or peci, has become ceremonial headwear for Muslim men in this region. This particular style is worn by Bugis noblemen, usually for Friday prayers at the mosque. The wider the gold band, the more closely related is the wearer to the king.

E3

Sarong with camels and tents

Northern Java, early 20th century

Cotton, dyes

Inscription: Bendera Radja Mekkah *("*Flag of the King of Mecca*")*

2000-05573

The lively procession of camels suggests both a trade caravan and a hajj journey. Turbaned men in sarongs, however, carry flags with slogans. The composition of a triangle and three stripes refers to the flag of the 1916 Arab Revolt against the Ottoman

Empire, led by the sharif of Mecca who received support among the Hadhrami Arabs.

The Hadhramis, who hail from Yemen, claim direct lineage to Prophet Muhammad. The majority of Arabs who settled in Southeast Asia are descended from Hadhrami families. Among their traditional businesses were the batik workshops along the north coast of Java, where this sarong was probably made. They also worked as agents who organised travel arrangements for pilgrims from this region.

Sojourners and settlers

At least once in their lifetime, Muslims who have the means, must conduct the hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca in the last month of the Islamic year. This annual congregation of believers from all over the world fosters international connections between Muslims and a deeper sense of belonging to the umma. This, in turn, facilitated the migration of different communities across the Islamic world. The hajj also

serves as a platform for the circulation of ideas and goods.

E4

Dala'il al-Khayrat (Guide to Goodness)

Originally composed in Morocco by Imam al-Jazuli (died 1465)
Malay Peninsula, Terengganu, 19th century
Paper, ink, coloured pigments, leather binding, gilding
2007-53427

This compilation of prayers for Prophet Muhammad is one of the most widely reproduced books in the Islamic world. Illustrations were added to the text after it became a popular reference for pilgrims. Ornately decorated in the Terengganu style, there are schematic diagrams of the mosques in Medina (left) and Mecca (right), with landmarks, such as Prophet Muhammad's tomb and the Kaaba, are indicated.

Sufi masters

The Nine Saints (Wali Songo) of Java, revered throughout the Nusantara, were missionaries who played a pivotal role in the spread of Islam on the island during the 15th and 16th centuries. Tales of their lives, and their methods of disseminating Islam continue to be told. Over time, mythical elements have been added. Their graves are still visited today as pilgrimage sites – a testament to their enduring popularity.

Of the Nine Saints, Sunan Kalijaga (born 1450) is often recognised for developing traditional gamelan music and shadow puppet theatre (wayang kulit) to suit Islamic sensibilities, thus ensuring the continuity of Javanese cultural heritage.

E5

Shadow puppets (Bima & Dewa Ruci)

Java, 20th century

Buffalo hide and horn, paint

1994-03887, 1994-04045

The larger puppet, distinguished by his enormous claw-like fingernails, is Bima, the second of the Pandawa brothers from the Hindu epic Mahabharata. The smaller puppet is Dewa Ruci, the divine manifestation of Bima's ego. This character is a Javanese invention introduced as early as the 11th century. Further adaptations to the Dewa Ruci play – where Bima embarks on a quest, encounters Dewa Ruci, and gains spiritual insight – are now widely regarded as a Sufi teaching story.

Sultans

Regional rulers played an active role in the spread of Islam as the traditional concept of society centred upon loyalty to the ruler. When a ruler embraced Islam, his subjects would follow, whether voluntarily or by royal decree. Upon conversion, the ruler almost always adopted the Islamic title of Sultan. “Sultan” carries religious significance, because he is regarded a deputy or “shadow of God” (drawn from the Hadith) – a concept of kingship popular in this region.

E6

Saucer

Riau-Lingga Archipelago, around 1900

Silver

Inscription: “This is Tengku Long Jiwa’s saucer”

XXXX-06529

The inscription possiby refers to the second wife of Sultan Syarif Kassim (reigned 1864–89) of Siak, on Sumatra. Both mainland and island Riau sultanates have shaped local cultures, from east-central Sumatra to Singapore and Johor.

Malay silverware was traditionally produced in royal workshops only. Motifs and patterns from the courts then served as standards for other artisans. In line with an Islamic preference for non-figural art, the dish features vegetal patterns, but with localised motifs, such as leaves and flowers of the bitter gourd plant depicted along the outer rim.

E7

Dish with Arabic calligraphy

China, Fujian province, Zhangzhou, 17th century

Porcelain

Inscriptions: inner rims and centre: Quran, 2:255, *Surat al-Baqarah* (The Heifer); roundels: shahada; Quran 112:1–4, Surat an-Nas (Mankind); "Glory and praise be to God"

1998-00487

The design of a central medallion encircled by eight smaller roundels is based on the nine-fold seal of the Sultan of Aceh. The Acehnese seal, in turn, was patterned after Indian Mughal imperial seals. The Aceh Sultanate was a major, regional Islamic power in the 16th through 18th century. The sultans would have ordered such large, inscribed dishes for use in communal feasts, a key aspect of ceremonial culture among Muslim societies in this region.

E8

Water vessel (terenang)

Malay Peninsula, Pahang, 19th or 20th century

Earthenware

C-0426-A

In the Malay world, earthenware pottery used to be a village craft, mostly executed by women. This shape derives from a southern Indian water pot. But the incised patterns are distinctively Malay. The jagged row of composite triangles along the base of the neck is known as the pucuk rebung – bamboo shoots pattern. This motif generally symbolises strength in unity, and flexibility as strength.

E9

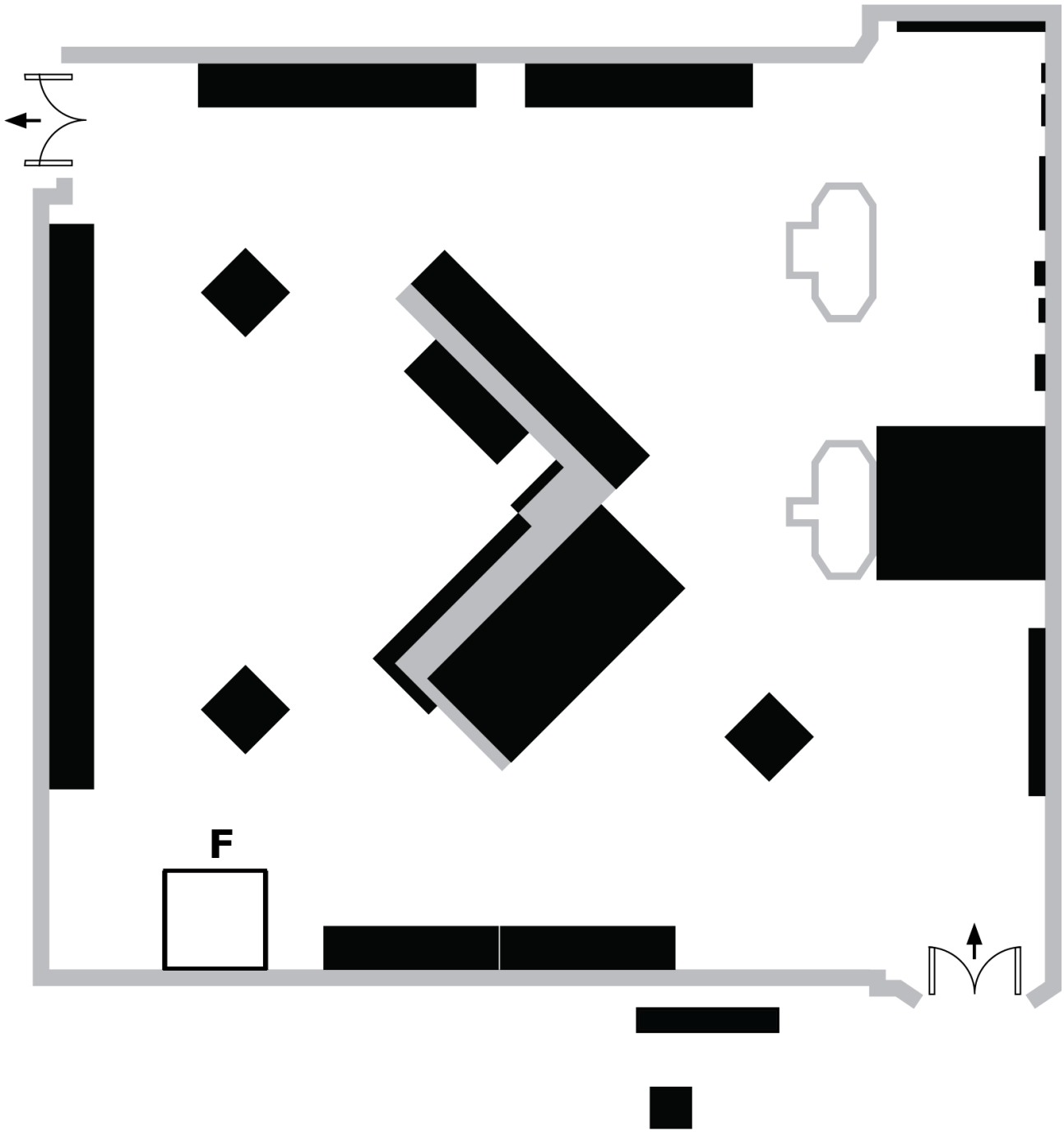
Betel box with beaded band

Mindanao (Philippines), Lanao del Sur, 19th or early 20th century

Brass with silver inlays, cloth, beads

2011-01955

Filipino Muslim communities share linguistic and cultural traditions with their Malay world neighbours to the south. Maranao brassware, like this box, is closely related to Malay brassware. The casting technique was most likely introduced through Brunei, a nearby Islamic state, well-known for their metalwork. However, the inlaying of stylised, floral designs (collectively termed okir, which means "engrave" or "carve") with silver alloy is particular to Maranao craftsmanship, and is what sets their brassware apart.


F

F

al-Buraq

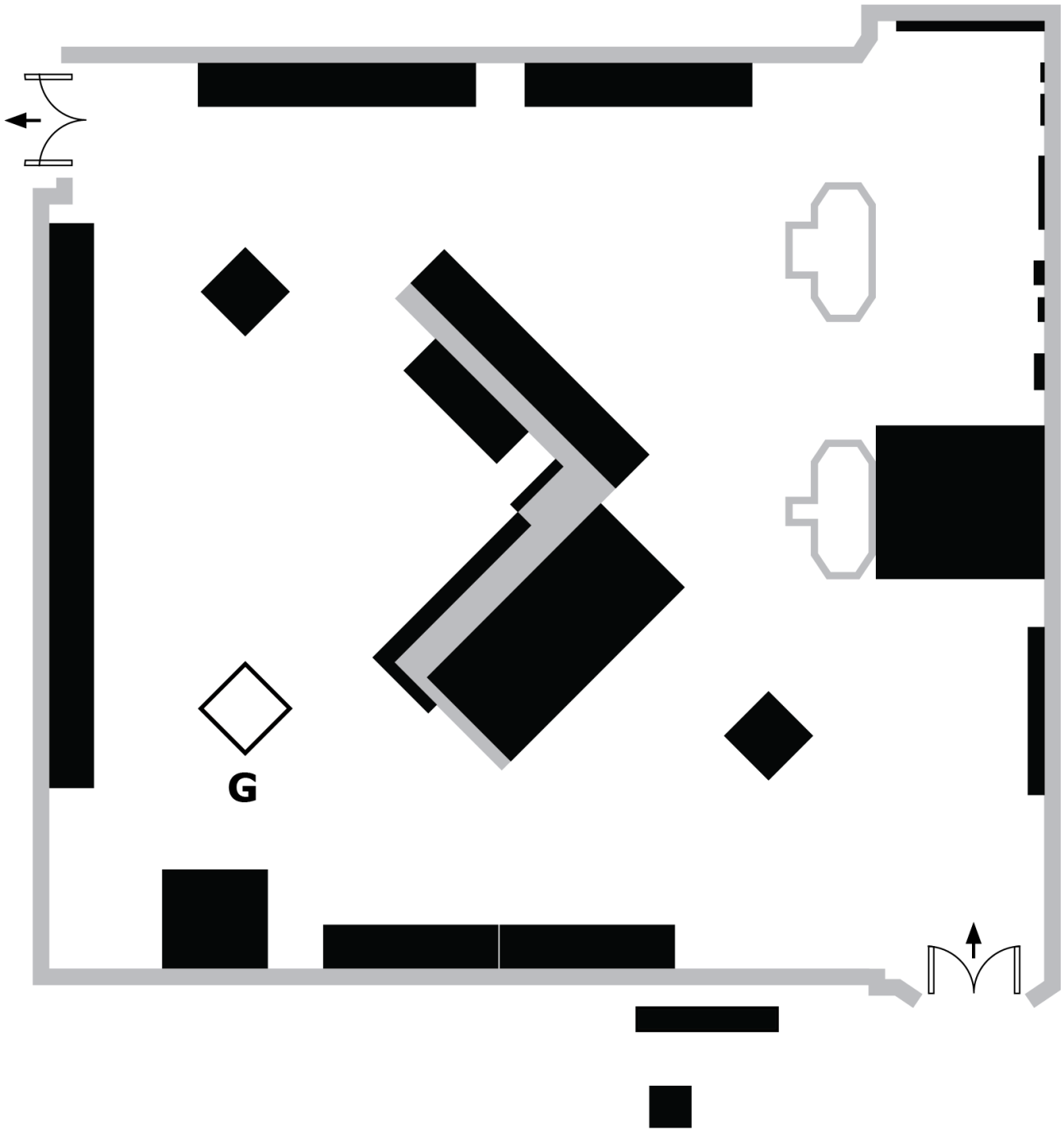
Philippines, Mindanao, Lanao del Sur, early or mid-20th century

Wood, paint

2010-00780

Every 27th of Rajab, the seventh month of the Islamic year, Muslims mark the Prophet Muhammad's miraculous journeys from Mecca to Jerusalem, and to the heavens. These are known as the Isra' and Mi'raj. According to tradition, the Prophet rode on the Buraq, "a white animal, half-mule, half-donkey, with wings", as he ascended the heavens in a single night.

Sculptures of the creature are popular in southern Filipino Muslim communities for display at important feasts and festivals. The nature-inspired motifs on the headdress and tail are characteristic of the Maranao people's artistry.


G

G

Scribe’s table

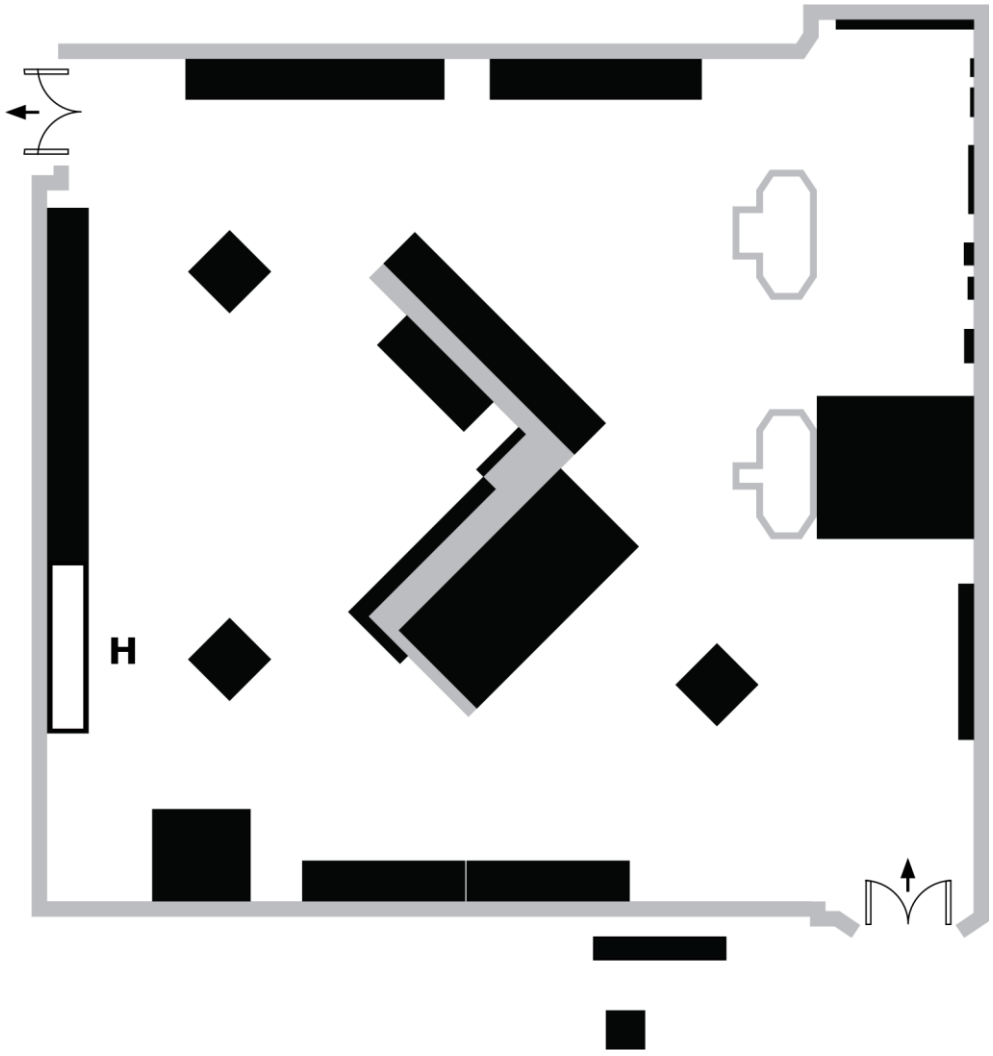
Turkey, 17th century

Wood, mother-of-pearl and tortoiseshell inlays

1999-01413

A scribe or calligrapher would usually sit on the floor and create his or her manuscript at this kind of low table. Its lavish decoration suggests that it was probably used within the palace’s scriptorium, or possibly owned by a member of royalty.

Ottoman sultans in the 16th and 17th centuries had a royal workshop that made magnificent objects with mother-of-pearl and tortoiseshell inlay for the court and other important clients.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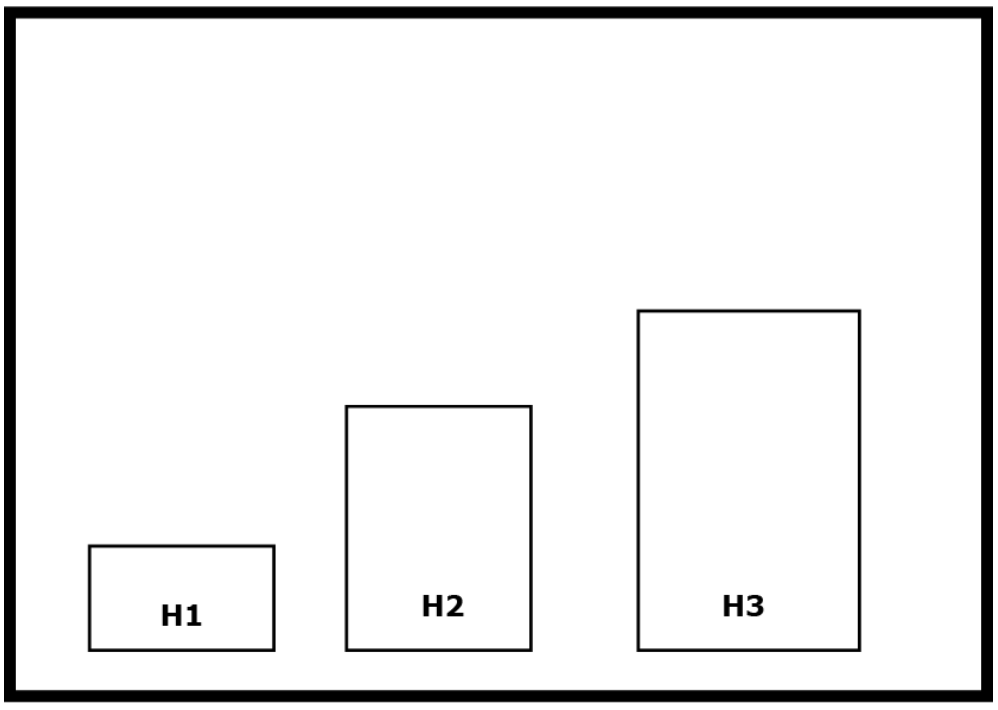

H1
H2
H3

H1

Altar set

China, 18th to early 20th century (Qing period)

Bronze, enamels

Inscriptions on: burner: “There is no god but God”; covered box: “Praise be to God”; vase: “God is perfect”

XXXX-04089 to -04091

The Huis of China are Muslims of mixed descent whose culture is a modified system of Han customs and traditions. The ancestral altar, central to traditional Chinese religious practice, is used differently by the Huis. Instead of portraits or figures, the Quran is placed there. Incense is burned to cleanse and purify the Quran.

A typical Hui set of incense-burning implements includes an incense burner, a covered box to hold unburnt incense, and a vase with a spatula (missing here). A decorative feature that distinguishes

implements made for Hui patrons are the Arabic inscriptions in a calligraphic style known as Sini (Arabic for “Chinese”).

H2

Quran stand

India, 19th century

Wood

2005-01508, 2005-01608-002

Like the illuminated manuscript, ornamental accessories for reading and storage of the Quran underscore the reverence Muslims accord to the holy text. The floral, geometric, or calligraphic motifs used conform to non-figural conventions.

When reading it, the Quran is usually raised up either on a pillow or stand. A Quran stand traditionally opens into an X-shape. When not in use, the Quran is stored away in a box or chest, or wrapped in cloth.

H3

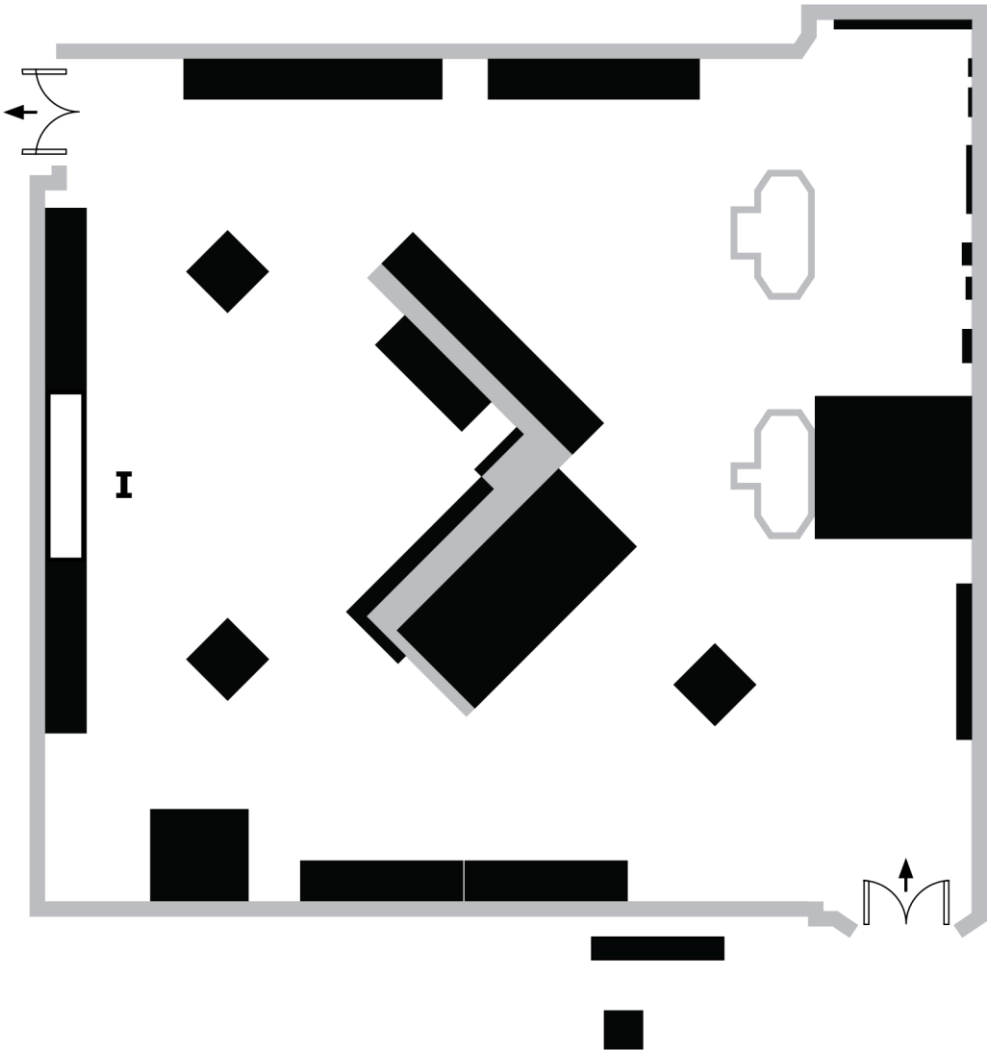
Quran stand

Turkey, 18th century (Ottoman period)

Wood, tortoiseshell and mother-of-pearl inlay and veneer

2000-03521

The technique of inlaying wood with other materials was practised by artists in Iran under the Seljuk (1040–1196) and in Egypt under the Mamluk (1250–1517) dynasties. Ottoman artists started to use technically difficult materials like mother-of-pearl for the inlays from the late 16th century. They took the art to new heights, reaching a virtuosity in applying these materials to cover entire surfaces.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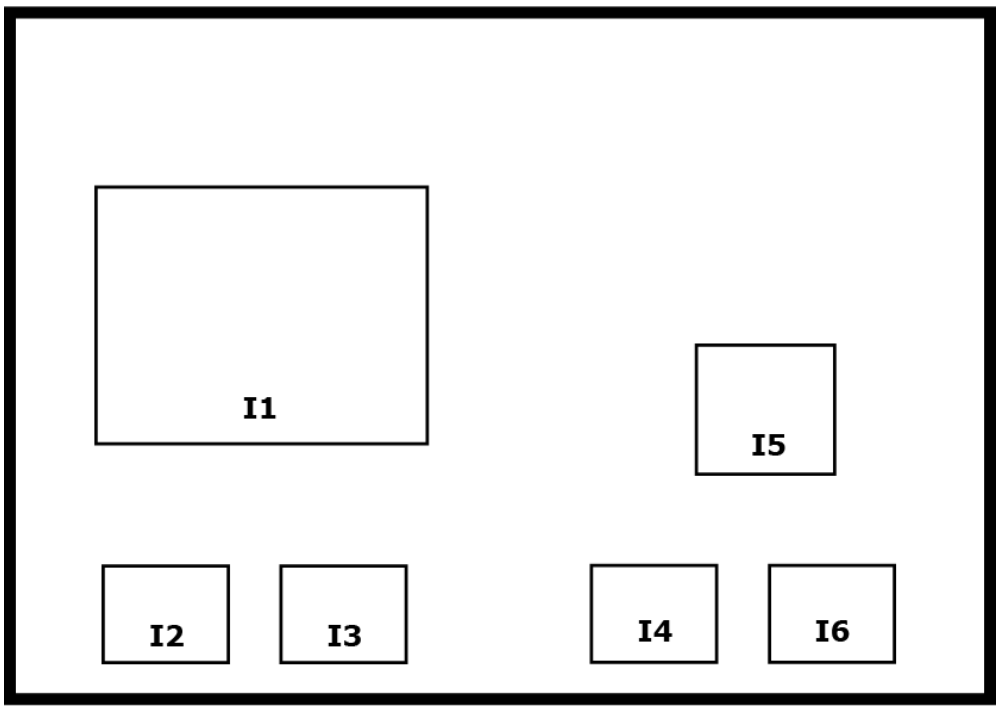
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I1

Quran folio

Syria or northern Africa, 8th or 9th century

Ink on parchment

Inscription: Quran 21:85–88, Surat al-Anbiya (The Prophets)

1999-00214

This folio shows an early form of Kufic, a stately script that developed in Kufa, Iraq, around the end of the 7th century. It was used exclusively for copies of the Quran until the 11th century. Aesthetic reasons, rather than grammar, drive the way the letters are spaced. Muslims believe that the Quran should be written as beautifully as possible, and that by copying the Quran, scribes receive heavenly reward.

The majestic size of this folio as well as the choice of parchment (dried animal skin), an expensive material of the time, highlights the Quran's stature. This folio very likely comes from one of the oldest

surviving Qurans, commonly referred to as the Tashkent Quran. The largest portion is in the library of the Tillya Sheikh Mosque in Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

I2

Religious manuscript

Possibly China, 18th or 19th century

Ink, colours on paper

1999-00467

I3

Hadith collection

Java, early 20th century

Black and red ink on dluwang

1994-05358

These two manuscripts illustrate other styles used in religious texts. Bold vertical and horizontal flourishes reflect the influence of Chinese brushwork on the religious manuscript's dramatic calligraphy. The Hadith compilation (recorded traditions of Prophet

Muhammad) uses the rounded Naskh script, which enables faster writing and facilitates note-taking.

Both texts illustrate how Arabic is written for non-native speakers. As its alphabet does not include vowel sounds, marks are inserted above and below the letters to guide readers to the right sound. Written on dluwang (a local paper made from beaten treebark), the Hadith collection features the main text in Arabic. The smaller-sized text is in Pegon, Javanese written with Arabic letters. Vowel marks are rarely indicated here. Notes along the margins are arranged in a pinwheel fashion based on the swastika.

I4

Quran

Iran, mid-19th century (Qajar period)

Ink, colours, and gold on paper

Inscriptions: right page: Quran 1:1–7, Surat al-Fatihah (The Opening Chapter); left page: Quran 2:1–4, *Surat al-Baqarah* (The Heifer*)*

2001-02606

I5

Second volume of a Quran in three parts

China, 17th century

Ink, colours and gold on paper, cloth binding

Inscription: Quran 9:89-93, Surat at-Tawbah (The Repentance)

2016-00295-002

I6

Quran

Yemen, dated 1184 AH (AD 1770)

Ink colours on paper, leather binding

Inscription: right page: Quran 1:1–7, Surat al-Fatihah (The Opening Chapter); left page: Quran 2:1–4, Surat al-Baqarah (The Heifer)

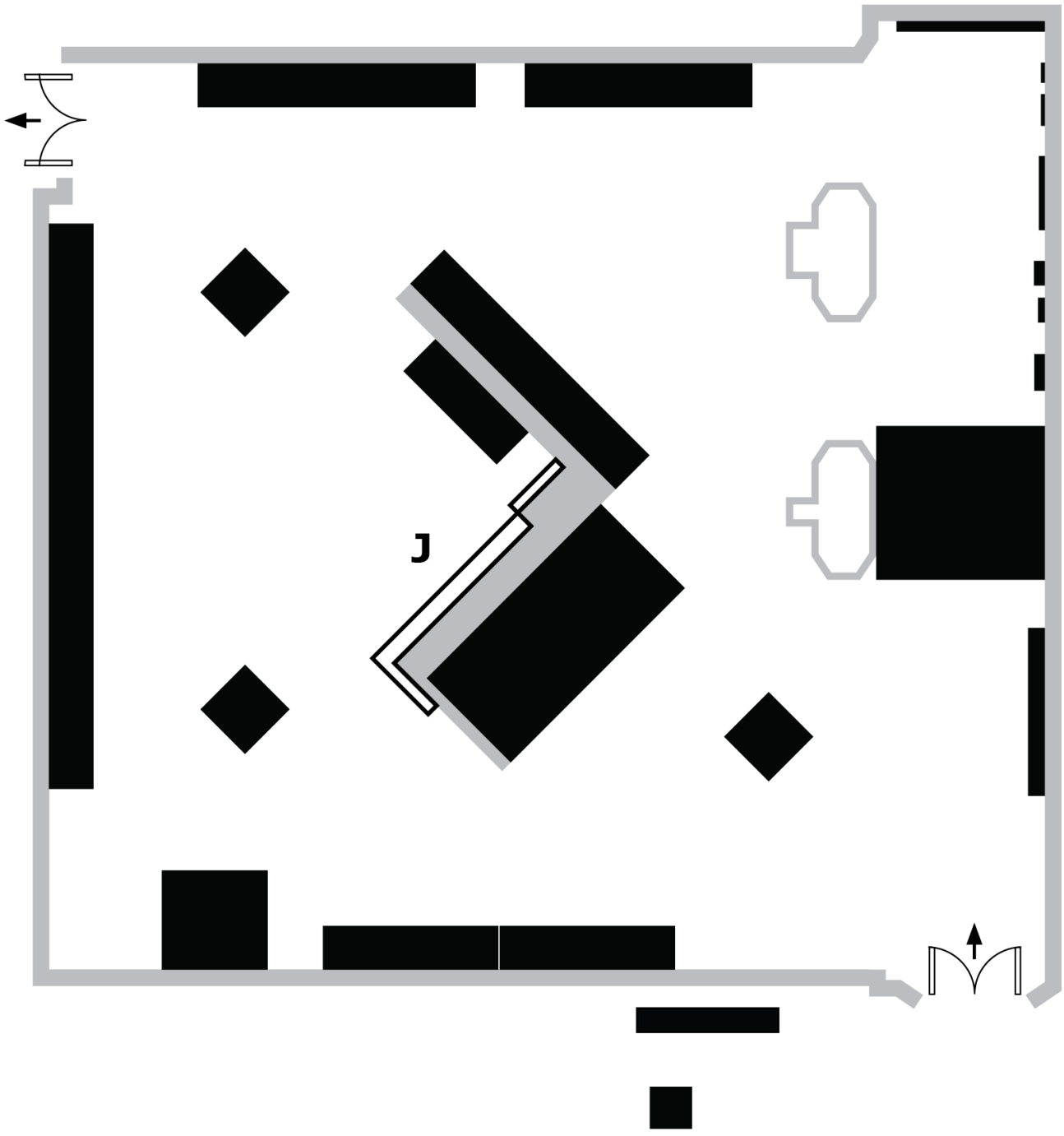
1996-02186

An "illuminated manuscript" is one where decorative elements, such as lavishly ornate borders, headers, letter initials and text frames, are added to the text. Colours are also used, including gold and silver. The finest illuminations tend to be reserved for the Quran, and the Qurans here show various illumination styles.

The opening double-spread of the Qajar Quran are the only illuminated pages in the entire book, and they feature titles of all the chapters inscribed in the gold squares. In contrast, every page of the Yemeni

Quran has colourful, decorated headers and frames, where gold is used for chapter titles.

The double-spread of the Chinese Quran incorporates Chinese motifs, such as lotus flowers and cloud scrolls. The rich patterns echo Chinese embroidery on silk. The division of this Quran into three volumes is unusual. Qurans are conventionally produced as single volumes or as a 30-part series, where each part is called a juz. The juz series is an ideal format for daily recitation within a single month.


J

J1

Grave marker

South-eastern Kalimantan, Kutai or Banjarmasin, dated AH 1311 (1894)

Wood

2011-01509

J2

Tombstone

Syria, early 9th century

Marble

1998-01542

In Muslim practice, the dead are buried as soon as possible, preferably on the very day of death. The body is buried on its right side, facing Mecca. The spot where the head lies may be marked, although according to tradition, elaborate tombstones are disapproved of. Despite this, ornate tombstones and funerary monuments have been built in the Islamic world.

Elaborately carved grave markers, in wood or stone, signified aristocratic status or wealth. Though both sides of the wooden marker appear to bear inscriptions in the same script, they contain two languages – Malay and Arabic. The marble tombstone is devoid of any other decoration except for its elegant Kufic script. Besides the customary inscriptions to indicate whose grave it is and Quranic verses (Surat Ali 'Imran, The Family of Imran), it is also signed by the carver.

J3

Tile with Kufic inscription

Western central Asia, late 14th century (Timurid period)

Glazed terracotta

Inscription: "Sovereignty is [for God]"

2016-00208

Monumental, lavishly decorated architecture was a distinctive feature of arts from the Timurid dynasty

(1307–1507). This tile would have been part of a mausoleum, like those in the Shah-i Zinda necropolis in today's Uzbekistan that house several family members of its dynasty founder, Timur. The inscription is a frequently used phrase seen on monuments, tiles, pottery, woodwork, and metalwork.

J4

Mihrab tile

North-eastern Iran, 11th century

Glazed fritware

Inscription: Quran 9:18, Surat at-Tawbah (The Repentance)

1999-02704

This tile decorated a mihrab, a semicircular niche along the wall of the mosque. The mihrab indicates the direction to Mecca, which Muslims face during prayers. The centre motif is a pendant lamp typically hung in mosques of the region. The lamp symbolises

nur (light), often interpreted as Divine Light indicating God's presence.

J5

Tomb tile

Afghanistan, 11th century

Glazed earthenware

1998-01541

The inscription is carved in Naskh calligraphic style and states that this is the tomb of Ali bin Muhammad Kakhir. This tile could have been part of a tombstone placed at the head of a grave, or in a niche along a mausoleum's wall.

J6

Calligraphic panel

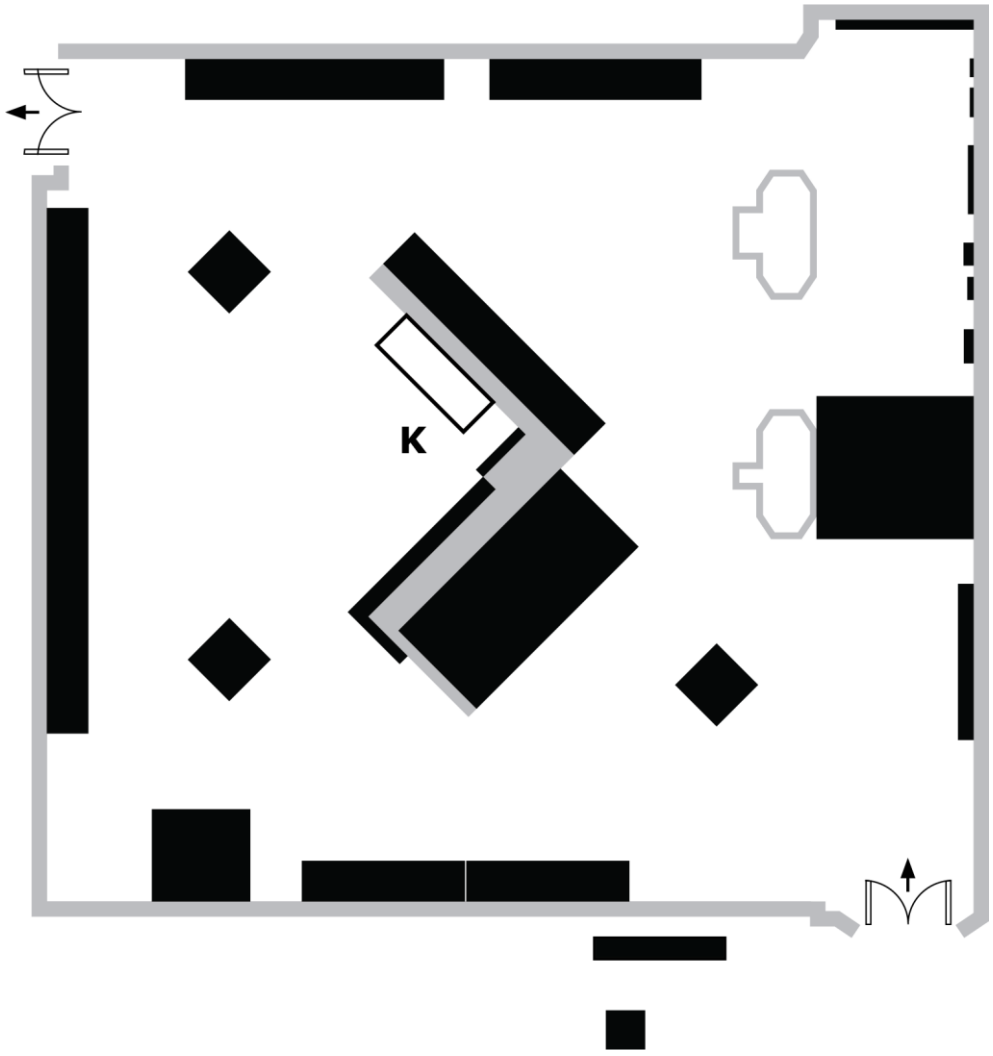
Western India, 14th century

Sandstone

Inscription: “The Opener of Gates of Profit and Sustenance; the Ominiscient”

1997-03352

Thuluth is a grand calligraphic style where the vertical strokes of letters are exaggerated. This style is favoured for architectural inscriptions. The names in the inscription refer to what is known as the 99 Names of God (asma al-husnaa) – divine attributes that Muslims must contemplate.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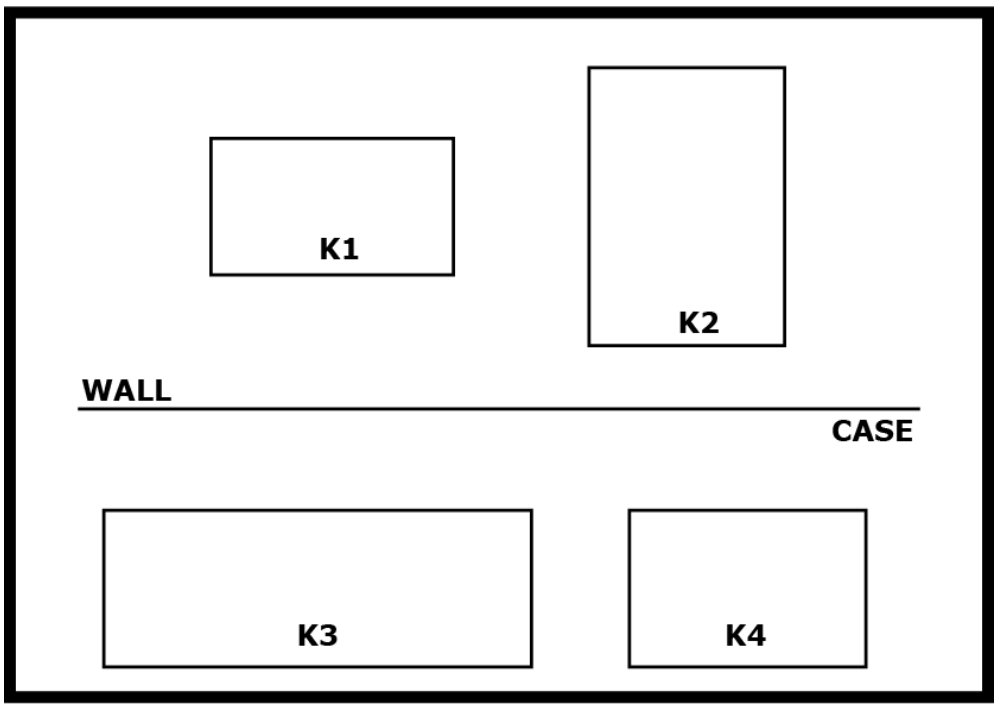

K1
K2
WALL
CASE
K3
K4

K1

A Muslim wedding ceremony

India, possibly Patna or Murshidabad, 19th century
Gouache on paper
2017-00942

This vibrant painting offers a glimpse into traditional Muslim wedding customs in India. A Muslim wedding requires only the solemnisation ceremony and a feast. But local rituals are often incorporated. This is probably the sharbat pilai ceremony, where the groom is taken to the bride's house and drinks the sharbat (a sweet syrup) among the company of his sisters and the womenfolk of his bride's family.

This type of painting is broadly known as a "Company painting" – referring to a range of hybrid Indo-European paintings made for employees of the various European East India companies. Many of the artists who made them came from former Mughal and other Indian courts. Paintings like these,

depicting daily life, festivals, and other subjects, served as mementoes of a stay in India.

K2

Bird calligram

Yusuf Chen Jinhui (1938–2008)

China, 1996

Ink on rice paper

Inscription: “In the name of God, the most gracious, the most compassionate”

1996-01738

With Chinese ink painting techniques, the artist has created an image of a bird from the words of the basmala, an invocation extensively used by Muslims in various aspects of their lives. Every part is formed from Arabic letters, including the wings and feet. The eye and beak, for example, are formed from a single letter.

Muslims recite the basmala before carrying out any action as a way of asking for God's blessings. It is also invoked at the beginning of every chapter in the Quran.

K3

Bahram Gur slaying the dragon in the cave

Iran, Shiraz, around 1570–80,

Watercolour and ink on paper

2008-00290

Iskandarnama (Alexander Romance)

Nizami (1141–1209)

Iran, Shiraz, around 1580–90

Ink, gold and gouache on paper, leather binding

2009-01598

Among the Islamic book arts, miniature painting is an art that readily impresses, delights, and fascinates. This folio and the book both come from one of the most famous Persian literary works – the

Khamsa (Quintet), a collection of five narrative poems. The folio depicts a scene from Haft Paykar (Seven Portraits), a romanticised biography of the legendary Sasanian king Bahram V (reigned 420–38), also called Bahram Gur. The scene from Iskandarnama (the Persian retelling of legends about Alexander the Great) shows the episode of Alexander fighting off Ethiopians.

Prior to the Mongol invasions in the 13th century, Persian painters drew from Byzantine and Sasanian artistic traditions. Later, during the Ilkhanid ("subordinate khan") dynasty, the painters at royal workshops saw Chinese paintings sent westwards from the Yuan dynasty capital (present-day Beijing). These served as models and led to the incorporation of Chinese stylistic elements. This can be seen in the way the rocks and hillsides, and the facial features, are illustrated in both works on display here.

K4

Calligraphic découpage panel

Signed: 'Abd Al-Husayn

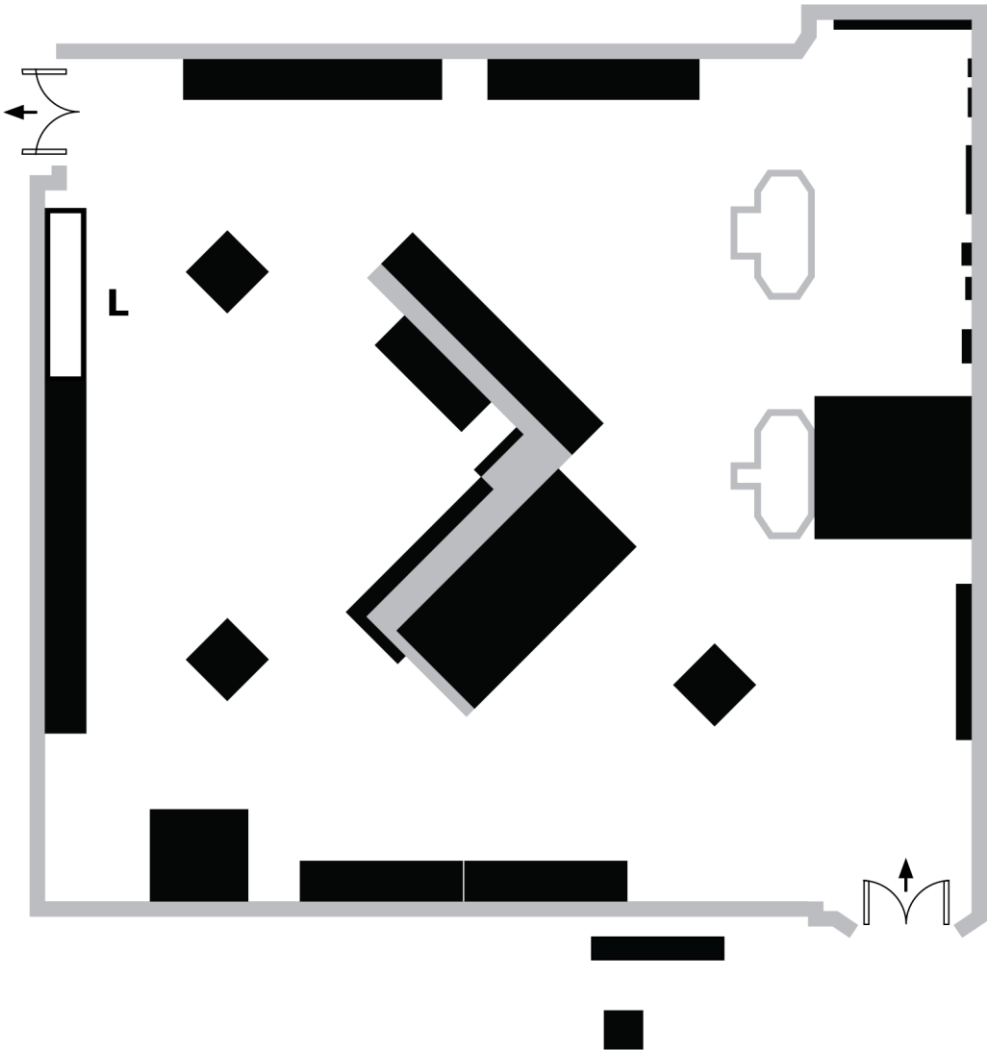
Iran, dated 1309 AH (1891)

Paper

2009-02247

Paper-cut, or “découpage”, calligraphy is known as qet’a in Persian, and also monabbat-kari, meaning “filigree work”. This technique was applied to manuscripts and even bookbindings, mostly between the 15th and 17th century. Masters of paper-cutting were celebrated as artists in their own right and given the professional title of qateh.

This découpage panel shows that the artistic tradition had not completely disappeared in the late 19th century.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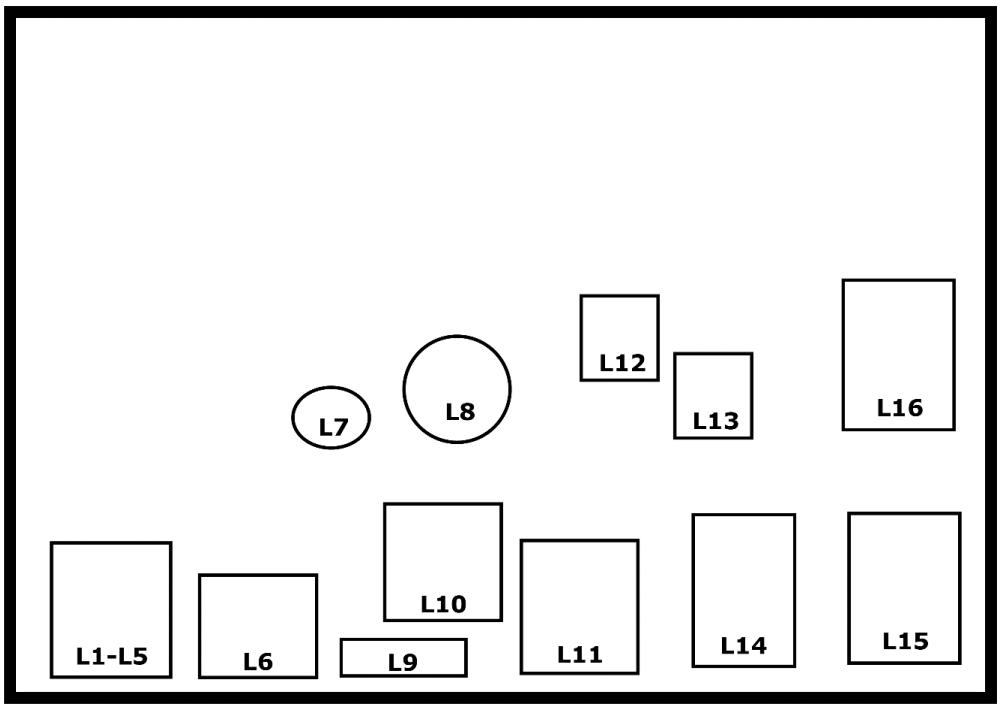
L1-L5
L6
L7
L8
L9
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L15
L16

L1

Pen box

Turkey, 17th century (Ottoman period)

Wood, mother-of-pearl and tortoiseshell inlays

1999-01414

L2

Pen box with inkwell

Turkey, dated 1876 (Ottoman period)

Steel (damascened), gold

Inscription: Tughra of Sultan Murad V [reigned May–Aug 1876]

1998-01539

The larger box would have been used by the scribe to keep not only his pen, but other writing implements: knives, scissors, inkwells. The smaller pen box features calligraphy and floral decoration in gold inlaid into the oxidised-steel base material.

The technique of decorating metal surfaces with inlays of precious metals, such as gold and silver, is known as damascening – after the city of Damascus, Syria, once celebrated for its damascened wares. The intricate calligraphic motif on the inkwell's surface is known as the tughra, an imperial calligraphic emblem typically used on official documents and decrees.

L3

Pen

Turkey, Istanbul, 20th century

Bamboo

Gift of Fuat Basar, Turkey

L4

Pen

Turkey, Istanbul, 20th century

Bamboo

Gift of Hasan Celebi, Turkey

2001-01606

L5

Pen

Turkey, Istanbul, 20th century

Reed

Gift of Fuat Basar, Turkey

2001-01616

These pens were used by celebrated contemporary Islamic calligraphers before being donated to this museum. The reed pen is the traditional writing instrument of Islamic calligraphers. For larger-sized writing, bamboo or wooden pens are used.

L6

A set of scribe's implements

Ottoman Turkey, 19th century

Steel (damascened), gold

Inscriptions on pen rest and knife: "Oh! The Opener!"; scissors: "Oh! The Opener of all doors, open the best door for us"

1997-04824-001–3

The calligrapher's pen is placed on the pen rest and then trimmed with the knife. Trimming might also include changing the angle of the nib to suit different calligraphic scripts. The scissors are to cut or trim the writing paper. The inscriptions each refer to one of the 99 Names of God. Both the knife and the pen rest are decorated with a turban, as some of the makers were affiliated to Sufi orders.

This turban is particularly associated with the Mevlevi Order founded in 1273 in Konya, Turkey. The dervishes (ascetics) of this order are well-known for

the Sema ceremony, which involves whirling dances with the recitation of prayers or religious phrases.

L7

Calligraphic jug

Iran, probably Kashan, late 12th century
Glazed and slip-painted fritware
Inscription: “Glory and generosity and happiness”
2011-02268

L8

Bowl with floriated Kufic script

Iran, Nishapur, 10th century
Slip-painted fritware
Inscription: “Generosity is a disposition of the dwellers of paradise”
2007-56610

Calligraphy is often regarded as the quintessential Islamic artistic expression. It can be found on a variety of media, from manuscripts and ceramics to

stone, throughout the Islamic world. The bowl shows how far calligraphy can be manipulated to create stylish “writing” that is more visually pleasing than legible.

Both the jug and bowl are examples of the more everyday objects on which calligraphy can be found. The phrases selected for decoration on these objects are usually less religious in nature.

L9

Album of paper-cut calligraphy

Calligrapher: Mir ʻAli Haravi (died 1566); paper-cutter: Sangi ʻAli Badakshi

Iran, early 16th century

Paper

1999-00799

The aim of paper-cut calligraphy is to reproduce the calligrapher’s style exactly. Hence, great skill is required to precisely cut out the letters after a

calligraphic composition has been transferred onto paper. This art is believed to have evolved from leather or paper fviligree work on bookbindings. Mir ʻAli Haravi is one of the best known calligraphers for Nasta’liq script, a distinctive Iranian style. Sangi ʻAli Badakshi is equally celebrated, having learned his art from renowned masters.

L10

Calligraphic album

Probably Iran, 14th to 19th century

Ink and colours on paper

1997-00739

L11

Calligraphic album on marbled paper

Signed: “The work of Ahmad Shevki”

Turkey, dated 1279 AH (1862–63)

Ink, colours on paper

1996-00020

Calligraphic albums became popular with the rising status of the calligrapher as an artist, and the resulting interest in collecting and commissioning of single-sheet compositions. Albums are generally called muraqqa’, derived from an Arabic root word meaning “to patch (together)”. Like patchwork, the art of various calligraphers and painters from different periods were collected and mounted together for the viewing pleasure of their owners. Aside from finished pieces, an album might also include calligraphic exercises and sketches.

L12

Bookbinding of a Quran

China, 17th or 18th century

Ink, colours and gold on paper; leather binding

1997-05216

Chinese Quran covers generally feature tooled ornamentation that is left uncoloured. They are very rarely gilded. The covers here feature a mixed repertoire of decorations and motifs that reflect the multifaceted aspects of its makers and patrons – both Muslim and Chinese. Although this cover is plainer, the calligraphy is executed in the distinctive Sini script inspired by the tapering brushstroke forms in traditional Chinese calligraphy.

L13

Bookbinding of a treatise on calligraphy

Mir ʻImad al-Hasani (1554–1615)

Iran, 17th century

Cardboard, leather, paint, lacquer

2000-05599

The central panels on both the front and back lacquered covers feature the gul-u-buta (bouquet) design frequently used for Iranian prayer manuscripts of this period. If you look closely, the covers appear to be shimmering. This is an overlay effect called marqash in Persian, created by dusting the painted illustrations with gold powder before applying the lacquer.

L14

Bookbinding of a Quranic section (juz)

Turkey, 16th century

Leather, goldleaf

1997-04823

Besides calligraphers, other artists were involved in bookbinding, helping to produce beautiful, luxurious books. This binding features fully gilded decoration with a central scalloped-edge medallion and vegetal patterns tooled into the leather.

The triangular side-flap is a feature commonly found on bookbindings across the Islamic world. Known as an envelope flap, it can serve as a bookmark. Though not visible here, the decoration on the reverse of the flap matches seamlessly with the front cover. On the side visible, there are central and corner medallions with intricate and delicate gold paper filigree over coloured backgrounds.

L15

Folio of Persian poetry

Iran, possibly 18th century

Ink, colours on paper

2010-00229

L16

Qasida al-Burda (The Poem of the Mantle)

Imam al-Busiri (around 1212–1295)

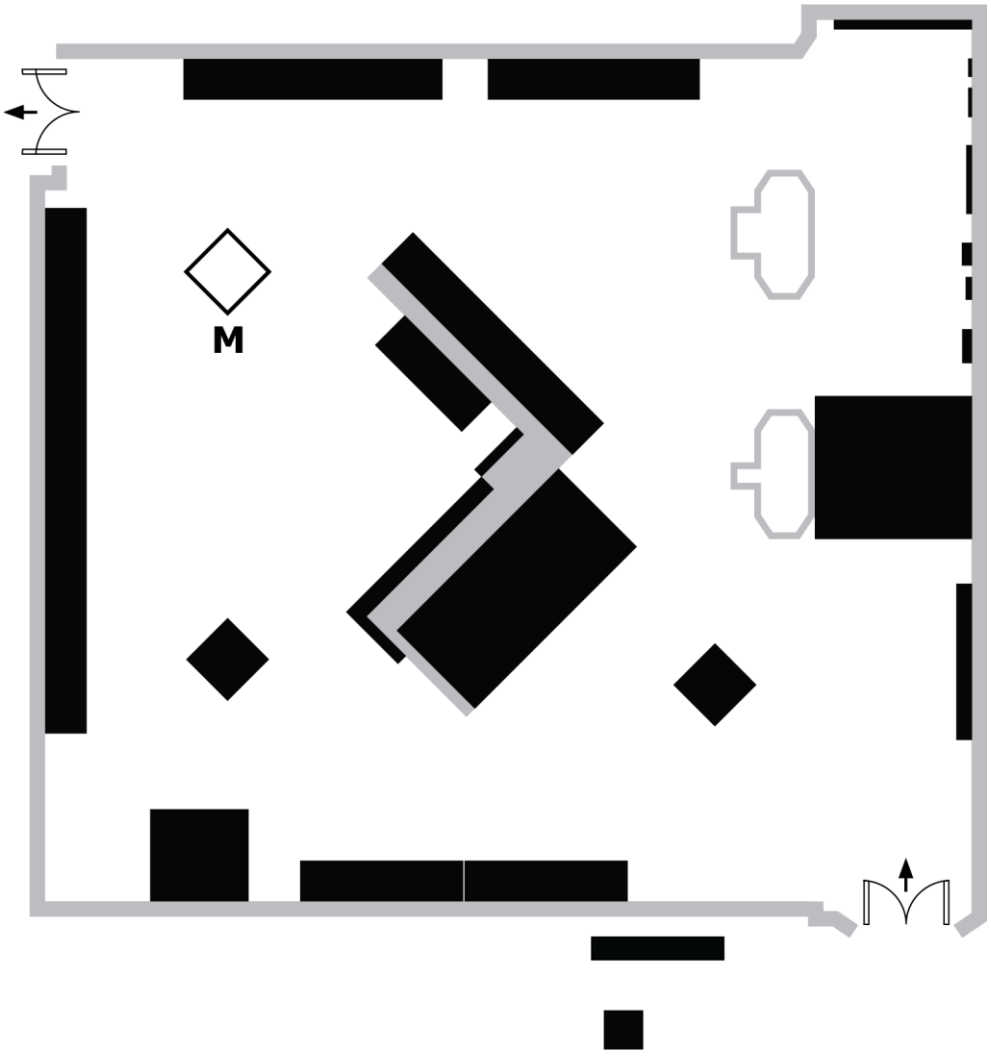
Mecca, dated 938 AH (1531)

Ink and colours on paper

1996-00186

In many ways, poetry allows for more creative page layouts. The verses of the Qasida al-Burda are presented along diagonal lines, resulting in a symmetrical, geometric pattern. This layout seems to reflect the consistent metre that runs through this poem, which is characteristic of the qasida genre.

The Persian folio is a single-sheet composition. Written in gold Nasta’liq script, the verses are arranged in two columns. A small triangular drawing depicts a group of men conversing. Single sheet compositions like this are ideal for collecting or as additions to an album.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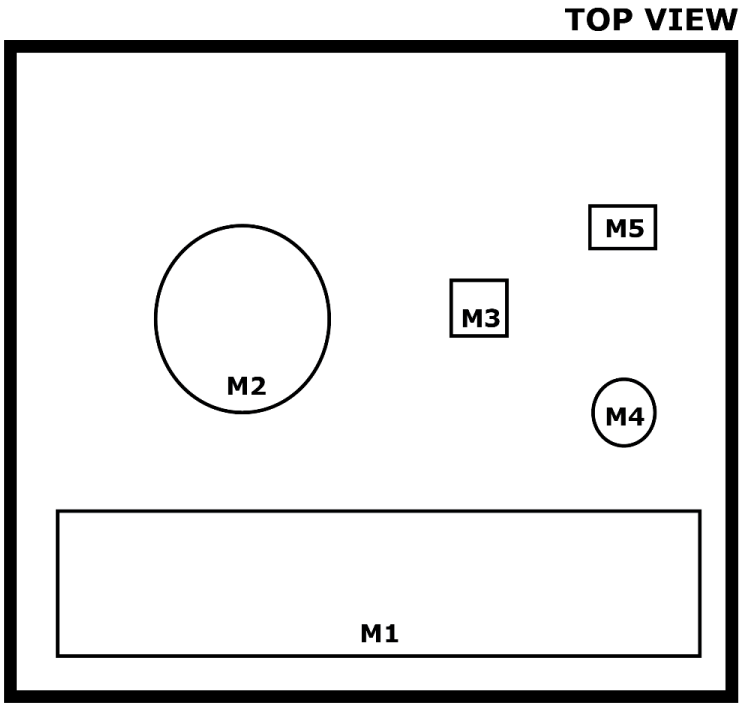

TOP VIEW
M5
M3
M2
M4
M1

M1

Parts of a planispheric astrolabe

Signed: ʻAbd al-Aʼimma

Iran, Isfahan, around 1700

Copper alloy

1999-01562

Over 30 instruments and sundials are believed to have survived from the workshop of ʻAbd al-Aʼimma. They were known for their accuracy and elegance. This specimen has been disassembled into its various components, arranged from front to back. When in use, the astrolabe is held up to the sky by using the cord attached to the ring on top, or the ring itself.

The pin (left) holds all the various parts together. It is kept in place by sliding a wedge, called a “horse” (right), through the slot.

The rete has been cut out to bear star pointers, shaped here like the tips of unfurling leaves, and the ecliptic ring. It can be rotated over the latitude plates underneath. The rete offers the instrument maker the greatest opportunity for artistic expression, and a great variety of designs exist.

Imagine the night sky with all the constellations. In combination with the rete, the plate (tympan) mirrors that sky at a given latitude. The North Pole is set at the centre of the plate, and altitudes are engraved as circles and arcs. An astrolabe usually comes with a variety of plates for different latitudes.

The mater is the main body of the astrolabe. The degree scale and hours of the day are marked along the rim, known as the limb.

Used as a sighting device, the alidade can be rotated to line up with a selected star or celestial body. The degree of the resultant altitude is read off the back of the mater, and used to determine the correct positions of the star pointers on the latitude plates.

M2

Quadrant

Signed: Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Awfi al-Khalwati

Turkey, Istanbul, dated AH 1325 (1907–08)

Wood, ink

1999-01564

This instrument is like an astrolabe, but reduced to a single quadrant. A handle enables the user to hold it up to the sky to calculate the altitude of celestial objects. In the later period of Islamic

astronomy, the quadrant replaced the astrolabe as the computational device of choice.

M3

Qibla compass

Turkey, first half of 19th century

Metal, paint

2002-00328

Modified compasses like this one are used by Muslim travellers to determine the qibla,
the direction of prayer. The freely rotating plate inside is known as the fly. On the underside of the fly is an iron needle that would swing towards magnetic north.

The design on the visible side features the Kaaba, the structure at the heart of the holy mosque in Mecca. Below the Kaaba is a table with the names of various cities. When the fly comes to rest, the qibla is charted by positioning oneself accordingly.

M4

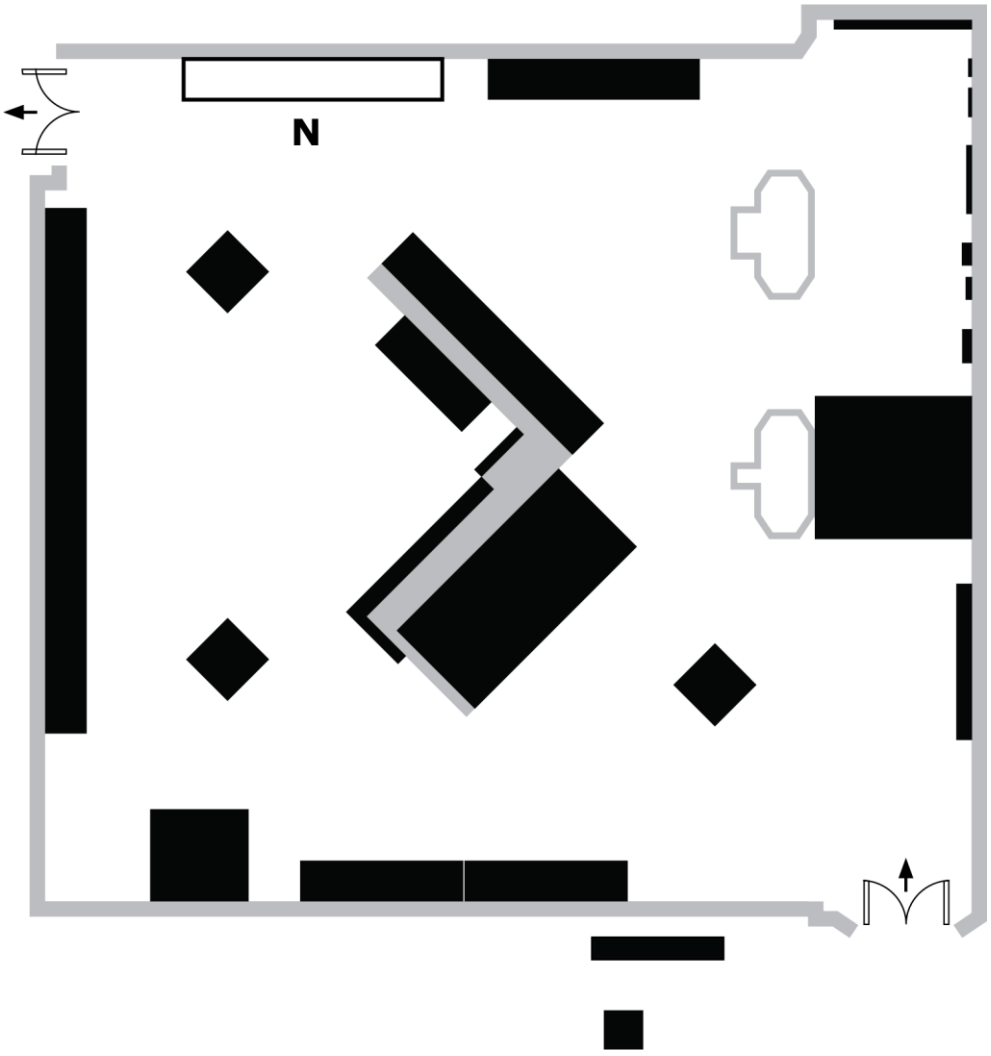
Dividers

Turkey, 18th century

Steel, gold

1999-01563

This instrument is used to mark off angles and lines on mathematical diagrams, geometric pattern designs, and architectural plans.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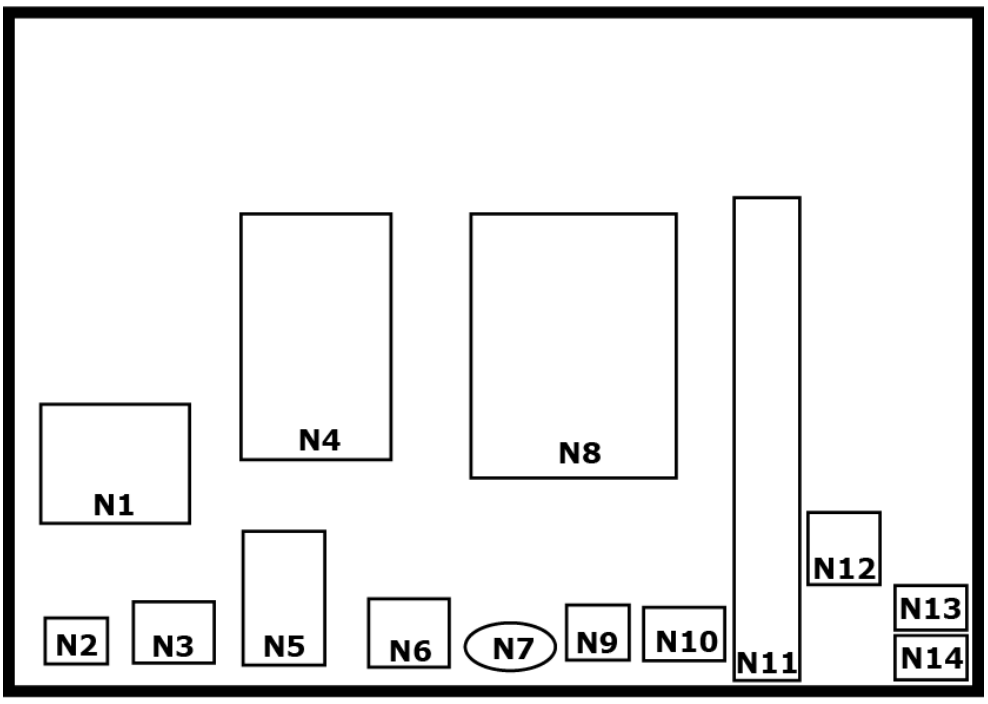
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N1

Manuscript on the Islamic world

Iran, Isfahan, dated 1118 AH (1706)

Ink, colours on paper, leather binding

2001-06789

This manuscript belongs to a tradition of geographical treatises generally referred to as the Kitab al-masalik wa-al-mamamlik (Book of Routes & Realms), containing maps of the Islamic world. The original text is attributed to al-Istakhri, a 10th-century Arab geographer. It begins with a description of the whole world, followed by the various regions from the Arabian Peninsula, the Mediterranean, the provinces of Iran, to parts of present-day Central Asia and northern India.

Seen here is an iconic world map that has been reproduced in various Islamic texts over many centuries. In medieval Islamic representations of the world, south is usually set at the top of the page.

The Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf, and Aral, Caspian, and Mediterranean Seas are featured, and the entire world is bounded by the Encircling Ocean.

N2

Manuscript on medicine and talismans

Malay Peninsula, Perak, around 1900

Ink, colours on paper

2000-06777

Written in Jawi (Malay in Arabic script), this manuscript opens with the invocation of the basmala. It advises on what medicines to prepare to treat or relieve ailments such as toothaches and fever. Also prescribed are invocations and the recitation of pious phrases, as well as designs (based on the perceived mystical properties of Arabic letters) for talismans or amulets.

These ideas are influenced by another genre of medical writing known as al-tibb al-nabawi

(prophetic medicine), popularised between the 13th and 15th century. The authors were typically religious scholars, rather than physicians, and advocated the traditional medical practices of Prophet Muhammad's day and those mentioned in the Quran.

N3

Tashrih-i Mansuri (Mansur's Anatomy)

Mansur ibn Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Yusuf ibn Ilyas
Iran, 17th century
Ink, colours on paper
1994-00001

For medieval Muslim scholars, the study of anatomy was a way of proving and understanding God's wisdom. The original text, composed by 14th-century physician Mansur ibn Ilyas for the governor of Fars, Iran, has been widely copied. It discusses the different systems of the body, which include skeletal,

nervous, muscular, and arterial. The last chapter covers organs and how a foetus is formed. Each chapter is accompanied by an extensively labelled diagram of the system under study, except for the last, which shows an anatomical illustration of a pregnant woman.

N4

Prayer chart

Singapore, mid-20th century

Wood, paint, metal, chalk

1995-00133

This chart was used at the Wak Sumang Mosque in Punggol until 1995, when the mosque was demolished. It shows the five prayer times, known in Malay as: subuh (dawn), zuhur (when the sun is at its zenith), asar (late afternoon), maghrib (sunset), and isyak (after moonrise). Affected by lunar and solar cycles, the precise timings will shift throughout the year. Hence, daily updates are required.

A sixth clock indicates imsak, which only applies during Ramadan. Drawn from the Hadith (prophetic traditions), imsak is usually set at a time before dawn prayers, and serves as a signal for Muslims to stop eating and drinking in preparation for the day's fast. The last row on the timetable indicates syuruk, the start of sunrise and end of dawn prayers. Muslims are not permitted to carry out prayers during sunrise and sunset. Historically, this was to distinguish Muslims from followers of religions that embraced sun worship.

Gift of Haji Mohd Amin bin Abdul Wahab, Singapore.

N5

Folio from De Materia Medica (On Medical Substances)

India, perhaps Golconda, dated Muharram AH 1004 (September 1595)

Ink, pigments on paper

2009-01437

This folio is from a 16th-century Persian translation of the famous 1st-century AD text on medicinal plants by the Greek physician Dioscorides. The first Arabic translation was completed in the 9th century in Baghdad, after which the work spread throughout the Islamic world.

De Materia Medica laid the foundation for the study of botany and pharmacology among Muslim scientists. Arabic versions of Dioscorides' text provided the basis for later translations into Latin, Persian, and Armenian. Written in Nasta'liq script, this folio follows Arabic versions.

N6

Divination manual (primbon)

Java, Semarang, dated 1824

Ink on paper

1996-00525

Manuals like this are consulted to guide give guidance on decision-making or auspicious dates and times for a range of events – from marriage to moving house.

Written in Jawi (Malay in Arabic script), the manual opens with instructions on what to do before using it, such as perform ablutions and recite specific Quranic verses. The manual combines numerology with Quranic verses to provide guidance.

N7

Belt buckle with magic square

Malay Peninsula, Perak, Kuala Kangsar, late 19th or early 20th century

Copper, gold inlays

Inscription: “There is no god but God and Muhammad is his messenger”

XXXX-04157

This type of belt buckle (called pending) is worn by both men and women as part of the traditional Malay dress. This buckle features the shahada written in mirrored form along the top and bottom of the buckle. In the centre is a 4 x 4 square containing Arabic numerals, which relates to the concept of magic squares.

Magic squares, where the sum of the numbers is the same for any row or column, as well as along the two main diagonals, have been used for talismanic purposes all across the Islamic world. The numbers

in this particular square, however, do not add up to the same total, suggesting a possible local variation.

N8

Talismanic shirt

India, 16th or early 17th century (Mughal period)

Cotton, ink

2017-00015

This shirt is inscribed, front and back, with all 114 chapters of the Quran, set within the rectangular panels with the chapter titles in gold. The shahada (profession of faith) is written in the large round medallions, while the 99 Names of God are inscribed into the border. The prevailing belief is that such shirts were worn by warriors underneath their armour for protection. Another possible use for is to cover the body of a sick person like a blanket, thereby using it as a healing garment.

N9

Talismanic cap with Quranic inscription

India, 19th century

Silk

2000-09138

This cap is inscribed with selected Quranic verses and would have been worn underneath other headgear, a turban perhaps. Certain verses or chapters of the Quran are believed to yield greater protection and benefits, such as the last two chapters, surat an-Nas (Humankind) and surat al-Falaq (Dawn).

Such beliefs are often linked to specific accounts told in the Hadith. For example, it is narrated that Prophet Muhammad recited the last three chapters of the Quran every night. As soon as he finished, he would blow onto his fingers and then massage his head and face, as if to transfer the blessings garnered from the recitation.

N10.1

Magico-medicinal bowl

Iran, 17th century (Safavid period)

Brass

1996-00181

N10.2

Magico-medicinal bowl

Malay Peninsula, Perak, around 1939

Brass

XXXX-03238

In the Islamic world, the tradition of drinking water that has touched Quranic verses, to cure illnesses, counter poisons, or relieve the pain of childbirth, has been established since the 9th century. Early methods involved writing Quranic verses in ink on paper, and then washing it out in the water to be consumed. This then developed into the practice of engraving bowls with verses.

Although separated by geography and time, both bowls display fairly similar designs, highlighting the circulation of such knowledge across the Islamic world. The design with a raised central boss was the most common form in Iran from the 15th century onwards.

N11

Talismanic prayer scroll

Turkey, 16th century

Ink, pigments on paper

1999-01412

The prayers on this scroll are written in Naskh and Muhaqqaq scripts. Magic squares, roundels containing prayers, various Quranic verses, and pious formulas are arranged in a variety of compositions. The format and length – nearly seven metres – makes it rather unwieldy, and this scroll

would have been fitted into a specially made container and carried as a talisman.

N12.1

Amulet container

Malay Peninsula, Pahang, Kuantan, early 20th century

Silver

XXXX-06374

N12.2

Amulet box

Turkey, late 19th or early 20th century

Silver

1996-01756

Containers like these would be filled with paper scrolls containing Quranic verses, numbers or Arabic letters believed to contain mystical properties, or other religious invocations. They would be carried

around as a form of protection from danger or harm from one’s enemies.

Decorated with plant-based designs, the Malay container is worn by strapping it, via the loops, directly to the body, hidden somewhere under clothes. The Turkish box bears invocations to God and the holy family, who are especially revered by Shi’a Muslims. The holy family comprises Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatima and her husband ʻAli, and their sons Hasan and Husayn.

N13

Miniature Quran Case

Iran, 19th century

Gold, turquoise

1999-00802

Extending from its holy status, the Quran is perceived to bestow protective powers. A miniature quran, often fitted into a case, was meant to be

carried or worn as a talisman. The piece of turquoise set in the centre of the cover is believed to avert the evil eye.

N14

Miniature octagonal Quran

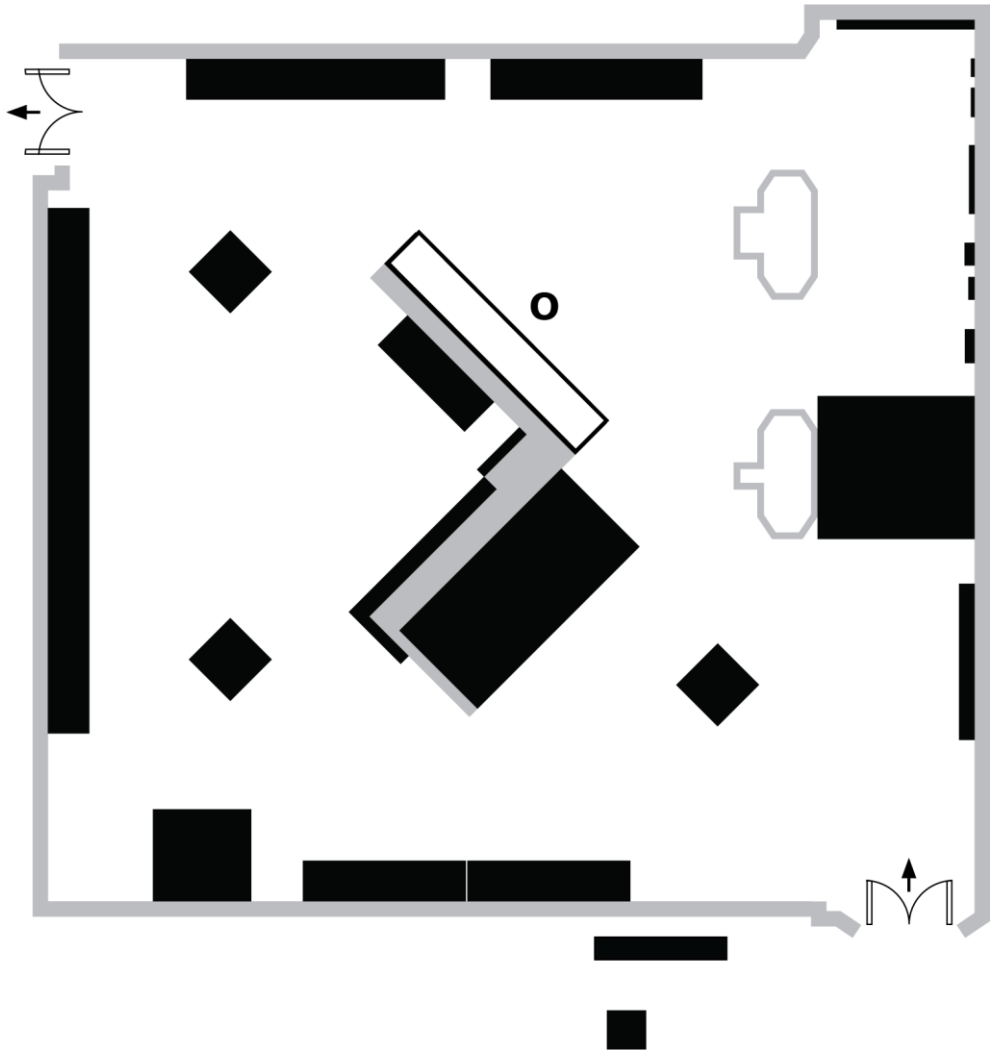
Turkey, dated AH 1172 (1758)

Steel, ink and colours on paper

Inscription: Quran 1:1-7 Surat al-Fatihah (The Opening Chapter)

1995-03905

Although miniature Qurans were not read, the calligrapher still had to accurately reproduce the entire text, using a special kind of minute script caked ghubar (literally, “dust”). The script was initially used for messages sent via pigeon post.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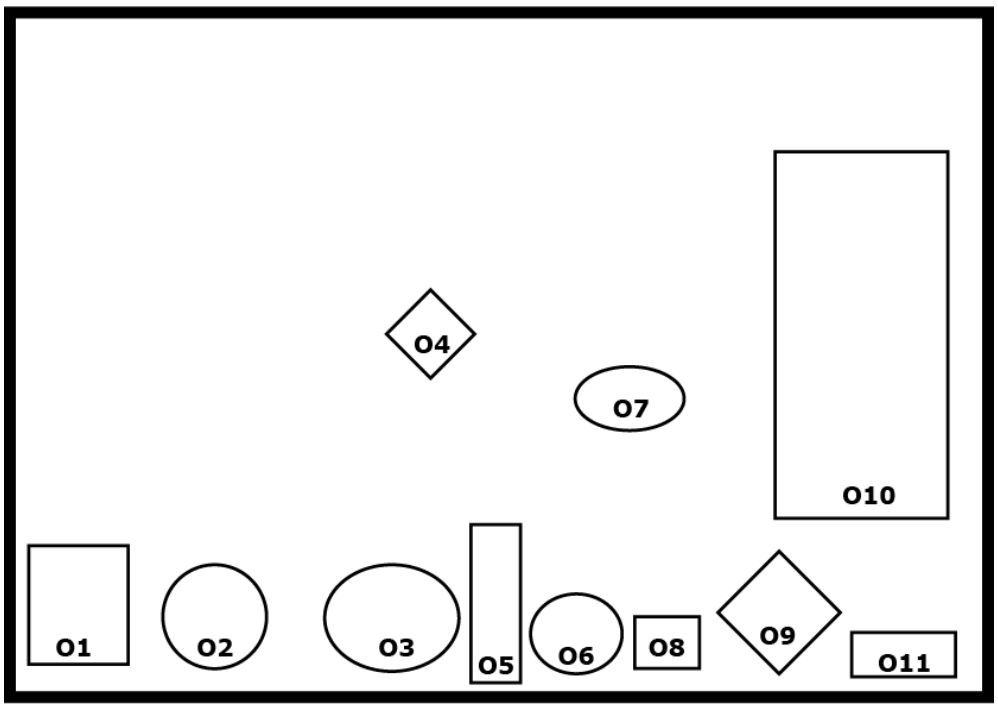
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O1

Illustrated page from Hadiqat us-Su'ada (The Garden of the Blessed)

by Muhammad bin Sulayman (around 1483–1556), known as Fuzuli, around 1547
Baghdad (Iraq), late 16th century (Ottoman period)
Paper, ink, gouache, gold pigments
2010-01361

No prohibition is expressed in the Quran regarding images of religious figures. Devotional images of Prophet Muhammad have been created throughout the Islamic world. Such images were largely produced in Persian and Turkish manuscripts between 14th and 17th centuries. They were usually viewed in small circles, as illustrated manuscripts were relatively expensive to produce.

This illustration comes from a text narrating the hardships endured by Prophet Muhammad and his family. The prophet is preaching from a stepped

pulpit (minbar) while his son-in-law, Ali, and his grandsons, Hasan and Hussein, are among the congregation. Their faces are veiled, and surrounded by halos of golden flames, as marks of respect and reverence.

O2

Bowl with seated couple

Iran, perhaps Kashan, late 12th or early 13th century (Seljuk period)
Frit body, enamel paint, gilding
2011-01938

This bowl exemplifies the use of figural art in a non-religious context. The Persian terms for this pottery type refer to its key characteristics: haft rang ("seven colours"), and mina'i ("enamelled"). Mina'i wares like this bowl were considered luxury items, and they often bear scenes of courtly or elite life. The jewelled turban and opulent robe of the bearded

man identifies him as a ruler. A courtesan or youth serves him.

O3

Bowl decorated with Chinese figures and Persian inscriptions

China, dated AH 1301 (AD 1883–84)
Porcelain, enamel paint, gilding
Inscription: “Commissioned by His Excellency, the Auspicious, the Most Glorious, the Most High, the Most Noble, the Eminent Sultan Mas’ud Mirza Yamin al-Dawla Zill al-Sultan”
2014-00480-003

Figural scenes of couples on the exterior, and livelier scenes of entertainment on the interior, of the bowl are set amid floral patterns. This design was popular among Qajar royalty, who often commissioned full table services in this style. Mas’ud Mirza (1850–1918) – mentioned in the inscription – was the son of Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar, the king of Iran (reigned

1848–96). Mas’ud was excluded from succession, but served as governor of several provinces, including Isfahan.

O4

Star-shaped tile with two figures

Iran, Kashan, dated AH 627 (AD 1230)

Fritware, opaque and lustre glazes

2011-01937

Eight-pointed star-shaped tiles like this one are usually fitted together with cross-shaped tiles to cover palace or tomb walls. Figural tiles have been found on both types of buildings, although they typically make up only a small part of the overall tilework. The inscriptions (this one includes a date) are typically Persian poetry or Quranic verses.

O5

Clogs

Turkey, 19th century

Wood, mother-of-pearl inlays

2013-00600

Platform shoes were used to keep feet dry while in the common areas of the hammam, the Turkish bath. Most clogs are plain and functional, so the decoration on these indicates the wealth and status of their owner. The rose-and-nightingale motif on the soles is a popular Persian motif inspired by Chinese examples. This pair requires the addition of toe-straps before they could be used.

O6

Zoomorphic kettle

Brunei, 19th century

Brass

XXXX-02920

Brunei Darussalam (“Abode of Peace”) has been an Islamic sovereign state since the 15th century. It was a renowned centre for ornate brassware during the 16th century, with trading links to the Middle East and China. Brunei brass work draws from the techniques, forms, and decorations of those regions. This kettle exhibits strong Chinese influence, as seen in the use of animals with symbolic meanings – dragons, frogs, fish – on its exterior.

O7

Bowl

Iran, Fars, 14th century

Copper alloy with silver and gold inlays

Inscription: "Glory to our lord, the greatest Sultan, the Learned, the Just, the Sultan of Sultans of the Arabs and Persians, the Triumphant, the master who curbs nations"

1999-00800

Fars, where this bowl was made, is a western province of Iran. It was an immensely productive centre of metalwork during the 14th and 15th centuries. Inscriptions exalting rulers (who remain unnamed) are a distinctive feature of Fars metalwork. Alongside the inscriptions are figural medallions showing courtly scenes. Each medallion depicts an enthroned ruler flanked by two servants.

O8

Casket with tulip-shaped knob

Iran, Khorasan, early 13th century

Brass with copper and silver inlays

2016-00296

Khorasan was an important region in northeast Iran, with major artistic production centres between 11th and 14th centuries. During this period, one of the more significant Islamic art developments was the advancement in metal inlay techniques. This enabled finer, more intricate and elaborate polychrome ornamentation and decoration. Metalwares that would previously have been plain were transformed into luxury items and works of art.

O9

Tiles with arabesque and geometric designs

Syria, 17th or 18th century

Frit body, opaque glazes

2006-00804, 2006-00805

Decorating the facades of building with tiles became a popular Islamic art practice from the 14th century onwards. Both arabesque and geometric patterns can be expanded or contracted to fit any flat surface or volumetric space. They are used to dazzling effect in Islamic architecture.

These complex patterns are perceived by Muslims as a meditation on the infinite and eternal nature of God.

O10

Hanging

India, Rajasthan, Jaipur, 18th or 19th century

Cotton with lining, silk thread embroidery

2006-00200

This embroidered textile was used either as part of a tent, or as a wall hanging or curtain in a nobleman’s residence. The floral design in the middle – a blooming plant in a vase – is a standard motif during the Mughal period (1526–1857), usually found on tiles on marble monuments and other Rajasthani buildings.

O11

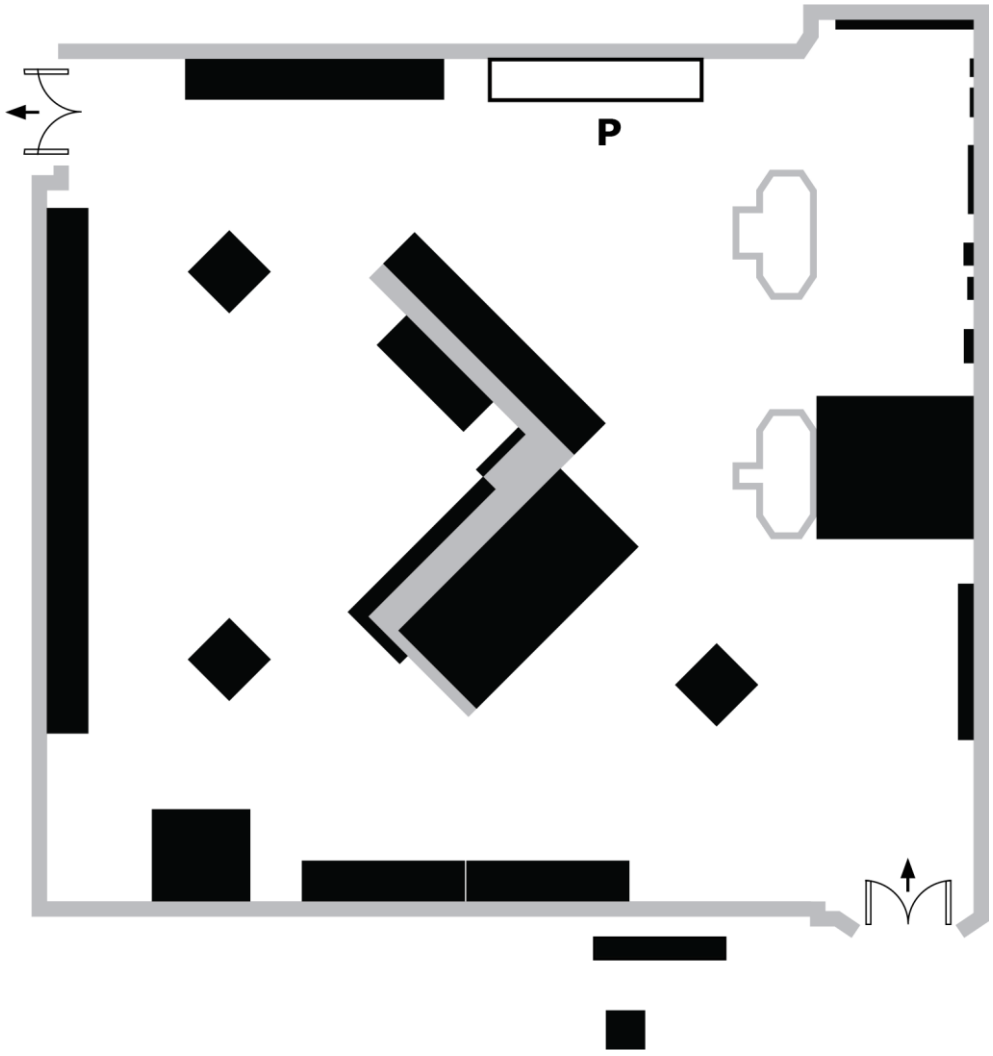
Fisherman's tackle box (kotak ke laut)

Malay Peninsula, probably Kelantan, early 20th century

Jackfruit tree wood

Z-0449

Despite their humble status, tackles boxes are often decorated with carved designs, inside and out. Used to store hooks, lines, and other necessary fishing equipment, they are carved from a single piece of wood to ensure watertightness. The type of wood used ensures that such boxes can serve as floatation devices in the unfortunate event of the boat capsizing.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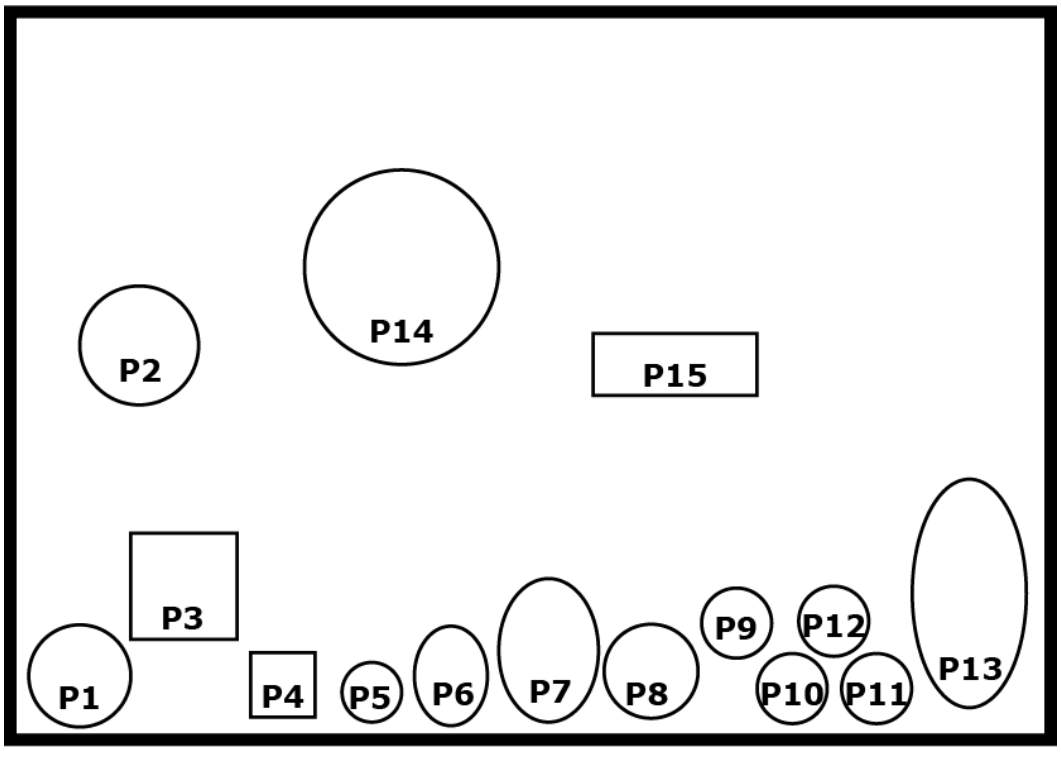
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P1

Hookah base

India, Bidar, dated AH 1256 (1840)

Zinc alloy, silver inlay

2011-03162

This base for a waterpipe, with blackened surface filled in with silver decoration, is an example of Islamic Indian metalwork referred to as “Bidri ware”. It developed and flourished under the Bahmani Sultanate (14th–15th century), whose second capital was at Bidar. Neighboring cities such as Hyderabad, Bijapur, and Lucknow also produced Bidri wares.

P2

Dish

China and possibly Iran or India, dated AH 1260 (1844–45)

Porcelain, enamel paints, gilding

2011-01521

This dish was probably made for a Shia Muslim patron in Iran or India. Persian verses relating to the martyrdom of Husayn, grandson of Prophet Muhammad, and the third Shia Imam, who perished in the battle of Karbala (AH 61/AD 680), decorate the dish. The teardrop shape used here is known as the boteh (Persian for “shrub”) motif, upon which the paisley pattern is based.

P3

Casket

India, Gujarat, late 16th or 17th century
Wood, mother-of-pearl, mastic resin, metal mounts
2015-00512

The decoration on this casket highlights the materials and specialised skills of artists in western India. They made objects for Islamic markets in the Middle East and Mughal India, as well as for Europe.

Finely cut mother-of-pearl was regarded as a wonder in Renaissance Europe and the Islamic world. Pieces in shades of pink, green, and silver were carefully selected to create variety and colour gradations. Arabic inscriptions (Nasta’liq script) appear on the sides.

P4

Cup

Central Asia, Golden Horde, 14th century

Partly gilded silver

2015-00060

This cup is lightweight and portable, perfect for a person travelling on horseback. The engraved and punched decoration is remarkably fine. The gilding and intricate patterns, as well as the decorative edging of the handle, suggest that it was made for a member of the elite.

The Golden Horde, part of the Mongol Empire, spanned from Eastern Europe to Siberia. Although various religions were practised, the Golden Horde was Islamicised during the 14th century through its longest-reigning leader, Öz Beg (reigned 1313–41), a Muslim convert.

P5

Hand mirror

Northern India, 18th century (Mughal period)

Jade

1994-00313

Jade was highly prized by the Mughal emperors, especially Jahangir and Shah Jahan (reigned 1605–1627 and 1628–1658). Flowering plants was a widespread motif in Mughal art, appearing on textiles, manuscripts, and ceramics. Artists were inspired by botanical drawings commissioned by their rulers, and also imported European prints.

P6

Jug

Iran, late 12th century (Seljuk period)

Glazed fritware

Inscription: “And blessings and happiness and good fortune”

1997-02613

Ceramics represent some of the highest achievements of artists from Islamic lands. Chinese ceramics imported into the Islamic world spurred technological innovations. By the mid- to late 11th century, a new material – made with a mixture of clay, quartz, and glaze (an advancement on earlier Egyptian faience) – was introduced in the Middle East by potters trying to copy Chinese wares. This material came to be known as frit. This jug is an attempt to replicate the whiteness of Chinese porcelain.

P7

Bowl

Iran, 17th century (Safavid period)

Glazed fritware

2015-00379

This bowl exemplifies a type of Islamic ceramics referred to as “Gombroon ware”, after the Persian Gulf port from which they were shipped. These typically white wares were produced from the late 17th through the early 19th century. The more desirable ones, like this bowl, feature simple pierced designs that have been filled in with a colourless glaze. The overall delicate texture and fineness makes the bowl appear like glass.

P8

Bowl

North-eastern Iran, 14th or 15th century
(Ilkhanid or Timurid period)
Glazed fritware
Inscription: “Blessings”
2006-02000

This bowl features a design of six segments containing palmettes, a quintessential unit of the Islamic arabesque. Although the arabesque has become synonymous with Islamic art, it developed out of long-established traditions of plant-based ornaments in cultures taken over by early Arab-Muslim conquests in the 7th century. The palmette motif comprises radiating petals or leaves that resemble a palm. It can traced back to Greco-Roman and even ancient Egyptian ornamentation.

P9

Marvered jarlet

Syria or Egypt, 12th or 13th century

(Ayyubid period)

Glass

2015-00058

P10

Flask with trail decoration

Iran or Syria, 12th or 13th century

Glass

2015-00057

P11

Bowl with half-palmettes

Iran, mid-9th to 10th century

Glass

2016-00292

P12

Flask with honeycomb pattern

Iran, 8th to 10th century

Glass

2016-00293

High-quality glass was one of the most significant developments of the Islamic Middle East.
Islamic artists in the region were technical successors to the ancient glass traditions of Greece and Rome. Inherited techniques include marvering (rolling a hot glass vessel onto strips of coloured glass) and trail decoration (drizzling molten glass onto cooled surfaces). Designs drawn from earlier traditions, such as the honeycomb pattern of the pre-Islamic Sasanian empire in Iran, were applied onto new forms that became identified as Islamic.

P13

Ewer

Probably Syria, 8th century

Bronze

2014-00479

Syria was an important artistic centre during both the Umayyad (661–750) and Abbasid (750–1258) caliphates. As an example of early Islamic art, this ewer displays influences from older artistic traditions: Roman, Byzantine, Sasanian. The shape has parallels in early Byzantine glass bottles; and the pomegranate thumbpiece is similar to designs found in early stucco decoration from Sasanian Iran (224–651).

P14

Dish

Iran, Kirman, 17th century

Glazed fritware

2013-00598

Chinese blue-and-white porcelain was greatly prized in Iran during the Safavid period (1501–1722). This spurred imitation and adaptation among local potters. This dish reveals both the Iranian potters' reverence for the original Chinese models as well as their own creativity in adding designs, with floral motifs being especially popular.

P15

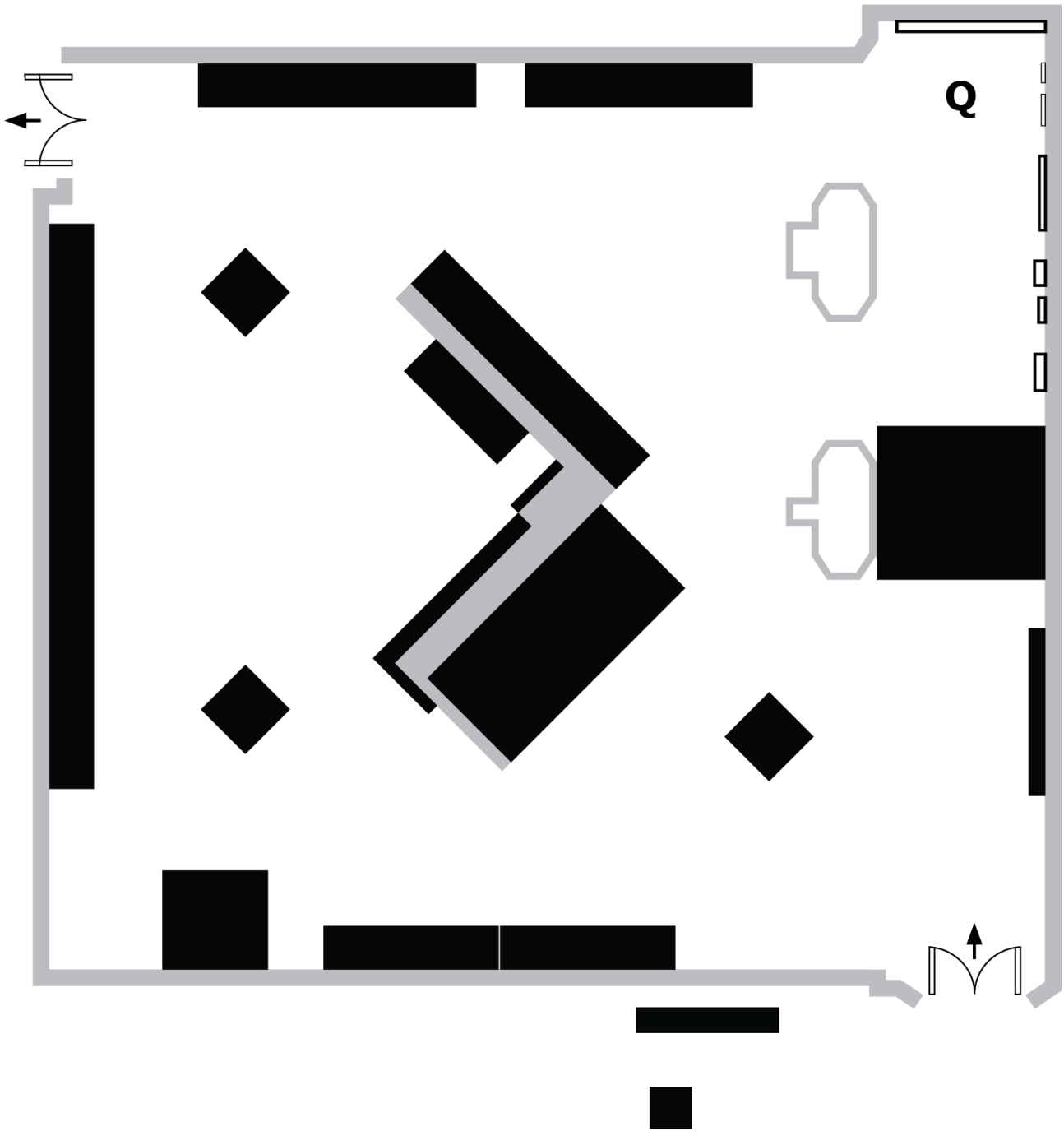
Calligraphic tile

Iran, Kashan, 13th century

Glazed fritware

1996-00190

One of the major innovations of Islamic art is the advancement of lustre painting. The technique involves the application of metallic glazes on already fired surfaces. The objects are then fired a second time to produce a shiny metallic veneer over the existing glaze. It appeared on glassware in Syria and Egypt from the 7th to the 9th centuries before being applied to ceramics, initially by Egyptian potters. It reached new heights in Syria and Iran, particularly at Kashan.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Q1

Geometric tile panel

Pakistan, Multan, 15th century

Glazed earthenware

2001-02610

This panel features a bold, twelve-pointed star design. Its colour scheme bears influences of Timurid-period (1370–1506) architecture from Central Asia, where blue signifies mourning. Hence, this panel was most likely placed on a doorway to a funerary monument or mausoleum. The brilliant turquoise and blue would have made the building stand out amid Multan’s landscape.

Q2

Decorative panel

Java, possibly Jepara, late 19th or early 20th century

Wood

2001-01623

These ornate panels were found in Terengganu on the Malay Peninsula – indicating the appeal and exportability of woodcarvings made on the north-eastern coast of Java. The expertise of Javanese woodworkers shines through on this panel. The deeply carved flowers and leaves appear as discrete units, layered on top of one another. Yet the panel is carved from a single plank. Panels like this one typically graced doorways or were integrated into walls.

Q3

A group of hexagonal tiles

Syria, 15th century

Frit body, lustre, opaque and transparent glazes

1998-01404-002, -003, -006, -008 to -013, -015, -017, -018

Lustre tiles like these were were not so common in 15th-century Syria. The development of lustreware was the Islamic potters' way of imitating on ceramics the gleam of precious metal. Owing to their fragility, lustre tiles were usually used within the interior of buildings.

Q4

Tile panel with tulips & carnations

Iran, 19th century (Qajar period)

Fritware, opaque and transparent glazes

2013-00602

These tiles are decorated with carnations, rosettes, pomegranates, and tulips. They differ from typical Qajar tilework in the unusually restrained use of colour. Plants and flowers are used both as central and supporting designs in Qajar art, which by the 19th century, often featured an increasingly flamboyant use of colour, including bright shades of pink, yellow, and green.

Q5

Pierced screen (jali)

India, dated AH 1305 (AD 1887–88)

Sandstone

1998-00877

Similar to wooden window grilles found in many parts of West Asia, Indian jalis are used to shade strong sunlight while allowing for circulation of air. This example contains an elegant inscription that appears to float above flowers and scrolls: “God. Praise be to God. Faisal Ali Khan, in the year of 1305.”

Q6

Muqarnas squinch tile

Iran, late 14th century

Frit body, opaque glaze

2005-01510

A muqarnas is a decorative element using hundreds of tiles like this one to create a honeycomb-like vault. (This can be seen in the half-dome suspended over the entrance to this gallery.)

A “squinch” is a transitional element between a rectangular structure and an arch or dome above. Tiles like this often adorn the tops of pillars and mihrab niches (indicating the direction to Mecca) in mosques.

Q7

Pierced tile

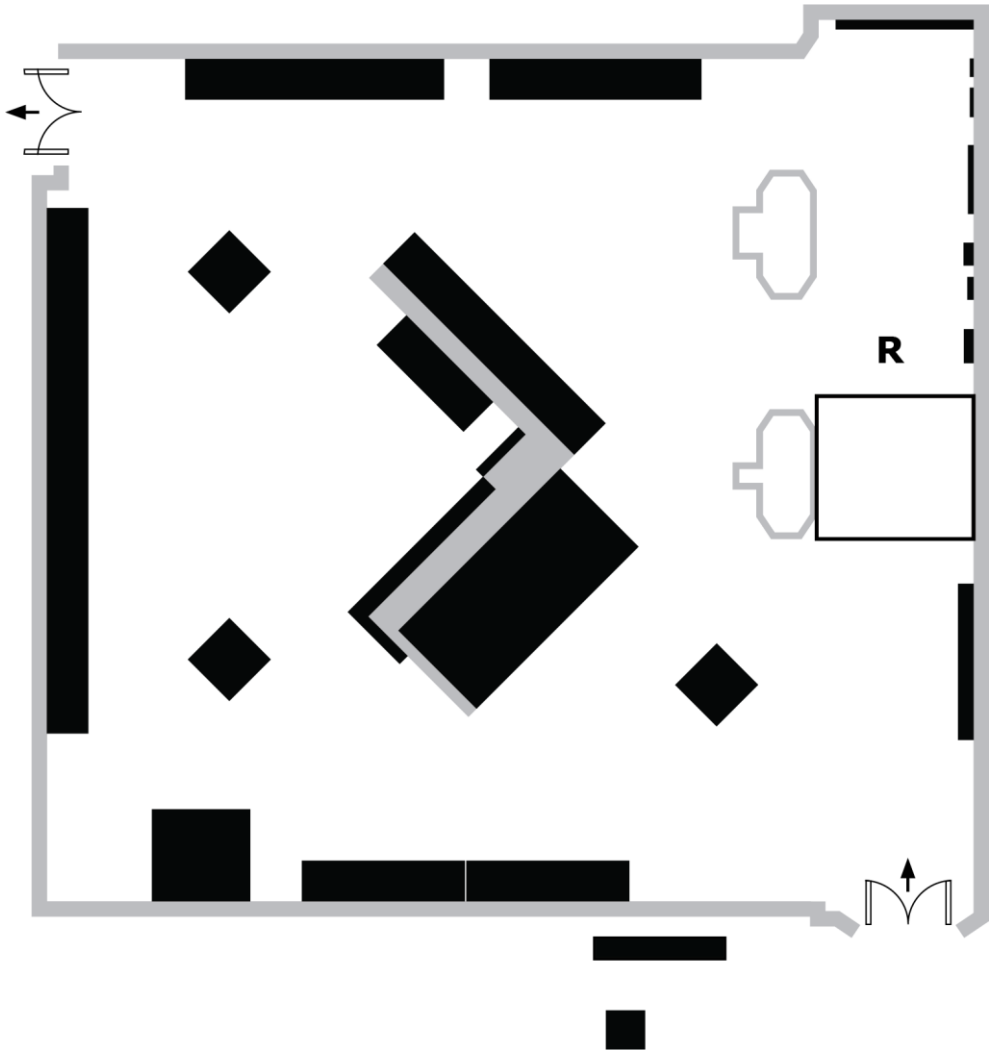
Western central Asia, late 14th century (Timurid period)

Frit body, opaque glaze

2009-01518

Geometric patterns are often multiplied from triangles, squares, and pentagons. By selecting full or partial outlines to draw or fill in, intricate patterns emerge.

One way to identify the base shape is to count the number of points or sides of frequently repeated stars or shapes in a pattern. On this tile, there are six-pointed stars and hexagons. 6 is divisible by 3, hence, the base shape is a triangle.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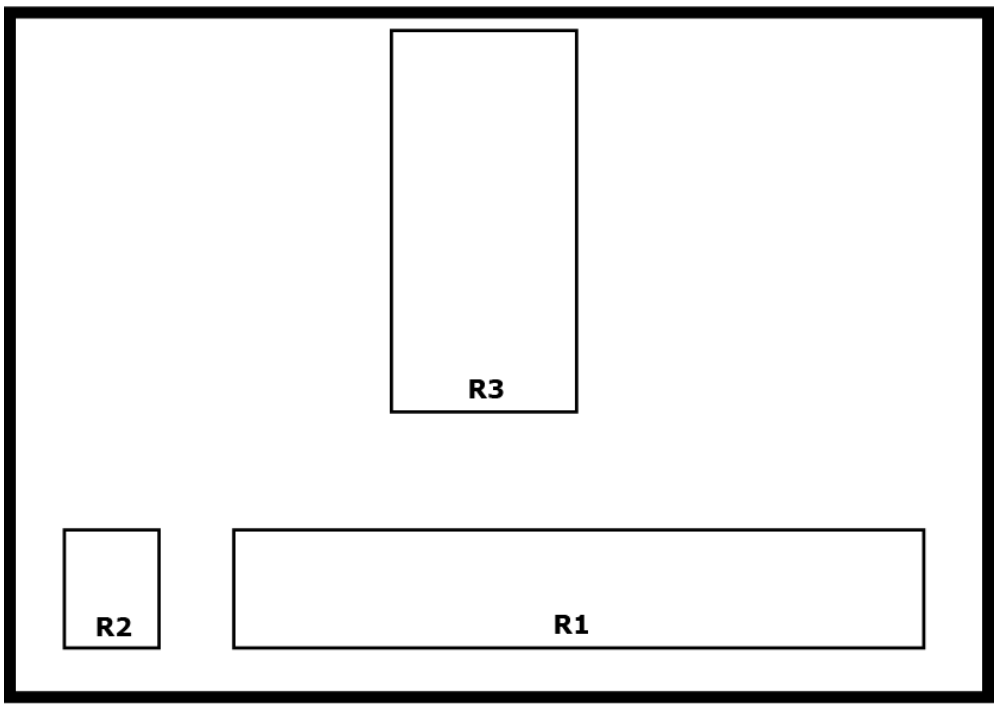
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The significance of Ashura

Ashura marks the anniversary of the battle of Karbala (in present-day Iraq) on the 10th day of Muharram in AH 61 (AD 680). It was one of a long chain of conflicts over the political and spiritual leadership of Muslims after the death of Prophet Muhammad in 632 (AH 10). Among those who perished was Husayn, Prophet Muhammad's grandson. His death and the earlier assassination of his brother Hasan accelerated the split along Sunni and Shia ideological lines.

Broadly speaking, Sunni Muslims accept elected imams (religious leaders), whereas Shia Muslims believe that imams can only be those related to Prophet Muhammad. At Muharram each year, however, all Muslims, regardless of sectarian differences, commemorate this battle and the deaths of Husayn and Hasan.

R1

Scroll painting of the Ashura procession

Southern India, possibly Madras, around 1830s–40s

Gouache on paper, cloth backing

2017-00321

Ashura is commemorated by activities including fasting, special prayers, and passion plays. But the most spectacular events are the processions, typically conducted in Shia majority areas such as Iran and parts of India. The standard processional elements include ta'ziya (representations of the tombs of Hasan and Husayn), and the 'alam (processional standard) and sipar (shield) to re-enact the battle of Karbala.

This nearly six-metre-long painting features the standard elements but also unusual characters and scenes, such as a company of Madras Native Infantry sepoys, men dressed up as demons and animals, and even a scene of the Hindu Charak festival.

This highlights the complex, cross-cultural reality of historical processions that is corroborated by eyewitness accounts and travelogues of the period.

R2

Hand-shaped finial

Iran, late 19th or early 20th century

Silver

2001-03836

This finial would have topped a processional standard. It is known as the “hand of Abbas”. It recalls the event leading to Husayn’s martyrdom, when Abbas, his half brother, had his arms amputated while trying to bring water to the camp. Abbas had also been given the authority to carry the standard in battle.

The names of the holy family – Muhammad, ‘Ali, Fatima (the Prophet’s daughter), and Hasan and Husayn (the Prophet’s grandsons) – are inscribed on

the fingers. Shia Muslims believe descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, through his daughter Fatimah and her husband, ʻAli, are the only legitimate successors and leaders of the Muslim community.

R3

ʻAlam (processional standard)

Signed: "Work of Muhammad Taqi, the worthy son of master Malik Muhammad, Dawatgar-bashi"
Iran, early 18th century (Safavid period)
Gilded brass and bronze, enamel
Inscription: Quran 110:1–3, Surat al-Nasr (The Help)
2011-03168

With the establishment of the Safavid dynasty (1501–1722), Shi'ism became the state religion of Iran. Processional standards like this would have been used during Ashura, when the battle of Karbala (AH 61/AD 680) is remembered for the death and martyrdom of Husayn, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, and the third imam of Shia Muslims.

The ʻalam represents a military standard used in processions that are part of the re-enactment of the battle. The teardrop-shaped panel is fringed with dragonhead ornaments. In the Islamic world, the dragon symbol can be interpreted as either auspicious or threatening and demonic. Rising above is a finial inspired by the sword of ʻAli – Husayn's father, Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law, and the first imam of Shia Muslims.