

Islamic Art at the Yale University Art Gallery

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1 Dinar, 661–750, Umayyad dynasty. Gold.
Diameter 1.9 cm. 2001.87.32245



3 Film still from the Rapture series, 1999, Shirin Neshat,
Iranian-American. Iris print. 2012.137.25



2 Pages from a Qur'an in Kufic script, 10th–11th century,
Abbasid dynasty. Deerskin. 14.6 x 11.4 cm. Hobart
and Edward Small Moore Memorial Collection,
Gift of Mrs William H. Moore, 1952.52.10



4 Nature morte aux grenades, 2006–2007, Mona Hatoum,
Palestinian-British. Crystal, mild steel and rubber.
95 x 208 x 70 cm. The Heinz Family Fund and
Katharine Ordway Fund, 2010.150.1

MUSICIANS GATHERED in a circle, prisoners of love, a princely entourage, a Sufi dervish, gryphons and bulbuls, and a history of the world. These are just some of the diverse topics covered in the Islamic art collections at the Yale University Art Gallery (YUAG). The collections have accrued over almost 100 years of gifts by alumni and patrons of the gallery, with the goal of sharing the richness and breadth of the histories and cultures that comprise the

Islamic world. The objects span almost 1400 years of history, from gold dinars from the 7th century (1) and deerskin Qur'an manuscripts from the 11th century (2) to works by contemporary female artists, such as the Iranian-American Shirin Neshat (3) and the Palestinian-British Mona Hatoum (4). The collections reflect the breadth of Islamic art itself, with material to be found in almost all of the collections in the gallery—from Indo-Pacific to African



5 Pair of Fibulae, 1820–1829. Silver. Gift of Labelle Prussin, Ph.D. 1973, 2013.62.4.1-2



6 Bowl with Arabic inscription reading “Glory Be to God”, 10th century, Samanid dynasty. Earthenware with black slip on a white slip ground under a transparent glaze. Diameter 11.3 cm. Gift of Fred Olsen, 1954.53.14

art (5), from numismatics to photography.

In this brief article, I will focus on select highlights of Islamic art from the Department of Asian Art, with the aim of introducing a broader audience to this remarkable teaching collection. Until Islamic art was taught at Yale almost two decades ago (I taught the first lecture in 2000), the collection was little known, even within the university. However, a dedicated gallery has now become a key stop for visitors and gallery guides alike. The hope of my colleagues and myself is to open the collection up for greater research and enquiry, while also showcasing their central role in pedagogy in the galleries and classrooms at Yale.

Ceramics

Ceramics are among the defining objects of Islamic art, from Fatimid lustreware to Ottoman Iznik tiles. As portable luxury objects, they served as precious gifts, as well as valuable commodities, that circulated around the globe. They were at once works of art and also functional, found in mosque and church repositories, as well as in imperial collections from Amsterdam to Samarkand. A remarkable efflorescence in ceramics took place in Iran between the 10th and 13th centuries, especially during the Samanid and Seljuk periods of rule (circa 10th–12th century). Bowls such as the YUAG’s epigraphic bowl (6), of earthenware with fine epigraphy in black slip, were adorned with aphorisms and blessings.¹ Too delicate to be functional and yet small enough to be held in two hands, they were likely gifted or displayed within domestic settings.

The YUAG’s ceramics are mostly from the mediaeval period, and are adorned with fascinating figurative motifs and poetic themes. For example, consider the plate on which is painted a man riding a bull and leading another man, shackled, on foot. The captured man has snakes emerging from his shoulders (7). It becomes clear that the story being narrated in this vignette comes from an episode in the classic Persian epic, the *Shahnama* (Book of Kings) of



7 Bowl depicting an episode in the *Shahnama*, late 12th–early 13th century, Seljuk dynasty. Mina’i ware, fritware with polychrome enamel on an opaque white glaze. Diameter 21.5 cm. Gift of Wilson P. Foss, Jr., Ph.B. 1913, 1953.24.8



8 Goblet, late 12th–early 13th century, Seljuk dynasty. Mina'i ware, fritware with polychrome enamels on an opaque white glaze. Height 11.6 cm. Gift of Wilson P. Foss, Jr., Ph.B. 1913, 1953.24.15



10 Star-shaped dish, late 12th–early 13th century, Seljuk dynasty. Mina'i ware, painted and gilded fritware on an opaque turquoise glaze. Width 16.8 cm. Gift of David M. Levitt, 1958.63.12



9 Bowl of Mina'i type, late 12th–early 13th century, Seljuk dynasty. Mina'i ware, fritware with polychrome enamels on an opaque white glaze. Diameter 20.1 cm. Gift of Wilson P. Foss, Jr., Ph.B. 1913, 1952.51.8

Firdawsi, written in 1010. The story depicts the capture of the malicious king, Zahhak, by the young hero, Fereydoon; it is one of many tales in the *Shahnama* in which good overcomes evil. Wondrous creatures also populated Persian literature, as exemplified in the half-woman half-bird harpies that encircle a delicate carafe, the white body of the vessel a luminous background to the magical creatures hopping around its surface (8). A pseudo-Kufic script runs along the rim, a reminder that the likely source for the imagery was in a text.

Literature was not the only source of inspiration: often ceramic artists played reflexively with the environment within which an art object would be appreciated; that is, the courtly culture of the time, in which *bazm o razm* (feasting and fighting) defined the codes of behaviour. Thus, a bowl shows a young prince or horseman at the centre, surrounded by his companions participating in animated conversation (9). Are they judging his riding and hunting prowess, or are they reciting poems in his praise? A different type of gathering is depicted in a magnificent star-shaped dish in dark blue lapis lazuli pigment, in which single figures are captured in each of the eight sides (10). The *minai*, or painted and gilded fritware, is an exquisite and unique object. It shows young courtiers, perhaps singers, beautifully dressed with gold armbands adorning

¹Oya Pancaroğlu, "Serving Wisdom: The Contents of Samanid Epigraphic Pottery", *Studies in Islamic and Later Indian Art from the Arthur M. Sackler Museum*, Harvard University Art Museum, Cambridge: Harvard University, 2002, pp. 58–68.

their robes. The *majlis* setting evoked here highlights the social contexts within which works such as these would have been evaluated and appreciated.

These ceramic objects mark not only the cultural practices of the mediaeval period, but also highlight the connoisseurial practices of the 20th century. For example, the star-shaped plate, presented to the YUAG in 1958, was shown in 1940 at the famed Exhibition of Persian Art in New York. It was also among the key objects in Arthur Upham Pope and Phyllis Ackerman's six-volume magnum opus, *A Survey of Persian Art from Prehistoric Times to the Present* (1938–1939).² Yet, it is not only ceramics that starred in Pope and Ackerman's construction of Perso-Islamic art history. Several textiles from the collection of Mrs Ada Small Moore were gifted in memory of her predeceased sons, Edward and Hobart, and comprised exceptional examples from the Sassanian period onwards.³

Textiles

Gifts from Mrs Moore's collection not only provide the opportunity for students and scholars to study a wide range of textiles, but also the historical periods which produced them. Thus, Safavid textiles from the 16th and 17th centuries highlight the cosmopolitan world of global exchange and travel. A hunting scene from the early 16th century is colourfully depicted in a fragment of cut and voided satin velvet with flat foil (11). For Safavid rulers, hunting was a favourite pastime and a skill learned by the young princes (and sometimes princesses) of the court. In this scene, the young man is holding a falcon in one hand, while behind him is seated a cheetah, both animals trained predators used in the royal hunt. A similar figurative textile (12) illustrates a remarkable scene inspired by the *Shahnama* episode seen in the Seljuk ceramic earlier. However, rather than referencing a particular story, this scene touches on a common poetic trope, the "captive of love". More literally, it depicts a young Safavid courtier on horseback leading a prisoner (perhaps an Uzbek) through the forest landscape. The compound satin weave marks it as a highly desirable object, one that would not only be purchased for the Safavid palace, but also exported across the globe. Safavid silks were in high demand in Europe, where they would be traded for silver and other precious wares. The addition of the designer or weaver's name, "Abdullah", into the quiver holder gives to the silk an even greater prestige.

Safavid textiles also mark the complex religious landscape of Iran in the late 16th century. Thus, several silks and brocades were made for local consumption by Christian communities, such as a remarkable satin band depicting Christ's Last Supper (13). The fragment, also a gift from Mrs Ada Moore, was most likely commissioned in the 17th century by members of the prominent Armenian community that was settled in Isfahan. Along with their monumental church, the Armenian merchants had beautiful houses in the city, and commissioned beautiful works of art, from bibles to frescoes.⁴

Works on Paper

Works of art from Iran (Persia), especially from the Safavid period, dominate the Islamic art collections at the YUAG. However, the largest grouping after the textiles is of works



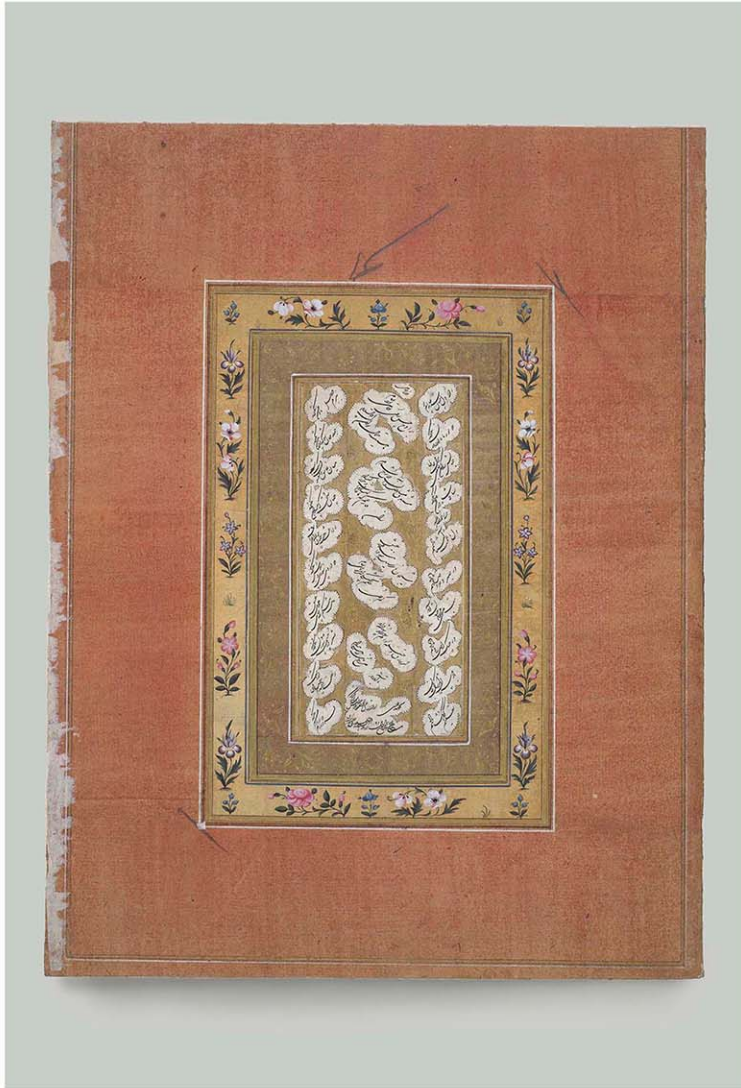
11 Textile fragment showing rider on the hunt, early 16th century, Safavid dynasty. Cut and voided satin velvet with flat foil. 46 x 46 cm. Hobart and Edward Small Moore Memorial Collection, Gift of Mrs William H. Moore, 1937.4624



12 Textile fragment showing rider and captive, signed Abdullah, early 16th century, Safavid dynasty. Compound satin-weave silk. 51 x 34.7 cm. Hobart and Edward Small Moore Memorial Collection, Gift of Mrs William H. Moore, 1951.51.86



13 Christ's Last Supper, 17th century, Safavid dynasty. Satin embroidered with silk and metal threads. 14 x 66 cm. Hobart and Edward Small Moore Memorial Collection, Gift of Mrs William H. Moore, 1937.5208



14 Persian poetry in *shikasta* script, dated 1779, Afsharid or Mughal dynasty. Ink, colour and gold on paper. 17.2 x 11 cm. The Vera M. and John D. MacDonald, B.A. 1927, Collection, Gift of Mrs John D. MacDonald, 2001.138.5



15 *Mi'raj* of Muhammad, circa 1570, Safavid dynasty. Opaque watercolour, ink and gold on paper. 26.2 x 18.4 cm. The Vera M. and John D. MacDonald, B.A. 1927, Collection, Gift of Mrs John D. MacDonald, 2001.138.2

on paper, starting with pages from the Qur'an (2). Written on deerskin in a beautiful Kufic script, the small, handheld versions of the Muslim holy text were deluxe objects that proclaimed the primacy of God's words as revealed to his prophet, Muhammad. In Islam, special care is given to the written word, as seen in later calligraphic exercises as well—many of them poetic, not prophetic (14). Unlike the collections in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, the works on paper at the YUAG are primarily single sheets, dissembled from the codex. Thus, there is

² Arthur Upham Pope, with Phyllis Ackerman, *A Survey of Persian Art from Prehistoric Times to the Present*, London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1938–1939, 6 vols. Kishwar Rizvi, "Art History and the Nation: Arthur Upham Pope and the Discourse on 'Persian Art' in the Early 20th Century", *Muqarnas: Journal of Islamic Art and Architecture* 24, 2007, pp. 45–65.

³ David Ake Sensabaugh and Susan B. Matheson, "Ada Small Moore: Collector and Patron", *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin*, 2002, pp. 30–49.

⁴ Sussan Babie, et al., *Slaves of the Shah: New Elites of Safavid Iran*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2004.



16 Ayesha, widow of the prophet, at the Battle of the Camel, circa 1425, Timurid dynasty. Opaque watercolour on paper. 43 x 28.7 cm. Gift of Mary Burns Foss, 1983.94.3



18 Portrait of Emperor Aurangzeb, circa 1680, Mughal dynasty. Opaque watercolour on paper. 15.2 x 8.3 cm. Hobart and Edward Small Moore Memorial Collection, Bequest of Mrs William H. Moore, 1955.7.32



17 Emperor Shiwan of China, circa 1425, Timurid dynasty. Opaque watercolour on paper. 33.3 x 22.3 cm. Gift of Mary Burns Foss, 1983.94.20

some difficulty in securely dating and identifying them. Nonetheless, thanks to archival research by students from Yale's History of Art department, several folios have been organised according to chronology, provenance and general theme.

Persian poetic texts were popular during the early modern period, from the Ottomans to the Mughals. Several folios from Firdawsī's *Shahname* are part of the YUAG collection, made in Iran as well as India. Additional subject matter includes religio-mystical stories, such as that of the Prophet's ascension to the heavens, the *Miraj* (15), as captured in a painting from the early Safavid period. The painting shows a veiled Muhammad riding on the half-human, half-horse creature known as Buraq, ascending through the skies, surrounded by luminous angels. The night sky, painted in pigment sourced from crushed lapis lazuli, serves as a foil against the gilded cloud swirls, and the resplendent, colourful wings of the angels.



19 White-eared bulbul, 1676, Mu'in Musawwir (1617–1697), Safavid dynasty. Opaque watercolour, ink and gold on paper. 19.5 x 10.9 cm. The Vera M. and John D. MacDonald, B.A. 1927, Collection, Gift of Mrs John D. MacDonald, 2001.138.9



20 Prince reclining on a bolster, circa 1650, school of Reza Abbasi (circa 1565–1635), Safavid dynasty. Opaque watercolour and gold on paper. 34 x 21.4 cm. Gift of Mary Burns Foss, 1983.94.16

Islamic history is also evinced in a series of folios from a dispersed manuscript of Hafiz Abru's *Majma' al-tawarikh* (16) written in 1425.⁵ Although folios from this compendium of history can be found in other collections, such as The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the substantial grouping at the YUAG is an immensely fascinating example of Timurid historical painting. The pages range in subject matter: episodes from the life of Muhammad to the genealogy of Chinese rulers (17); and from Islamic history to Iranian myth. The large format of the folios, coupled with the fine calligraphy and painting, points to a courtly commission and a book project that likely originated in one of the princely workshops of the Timurid princes.

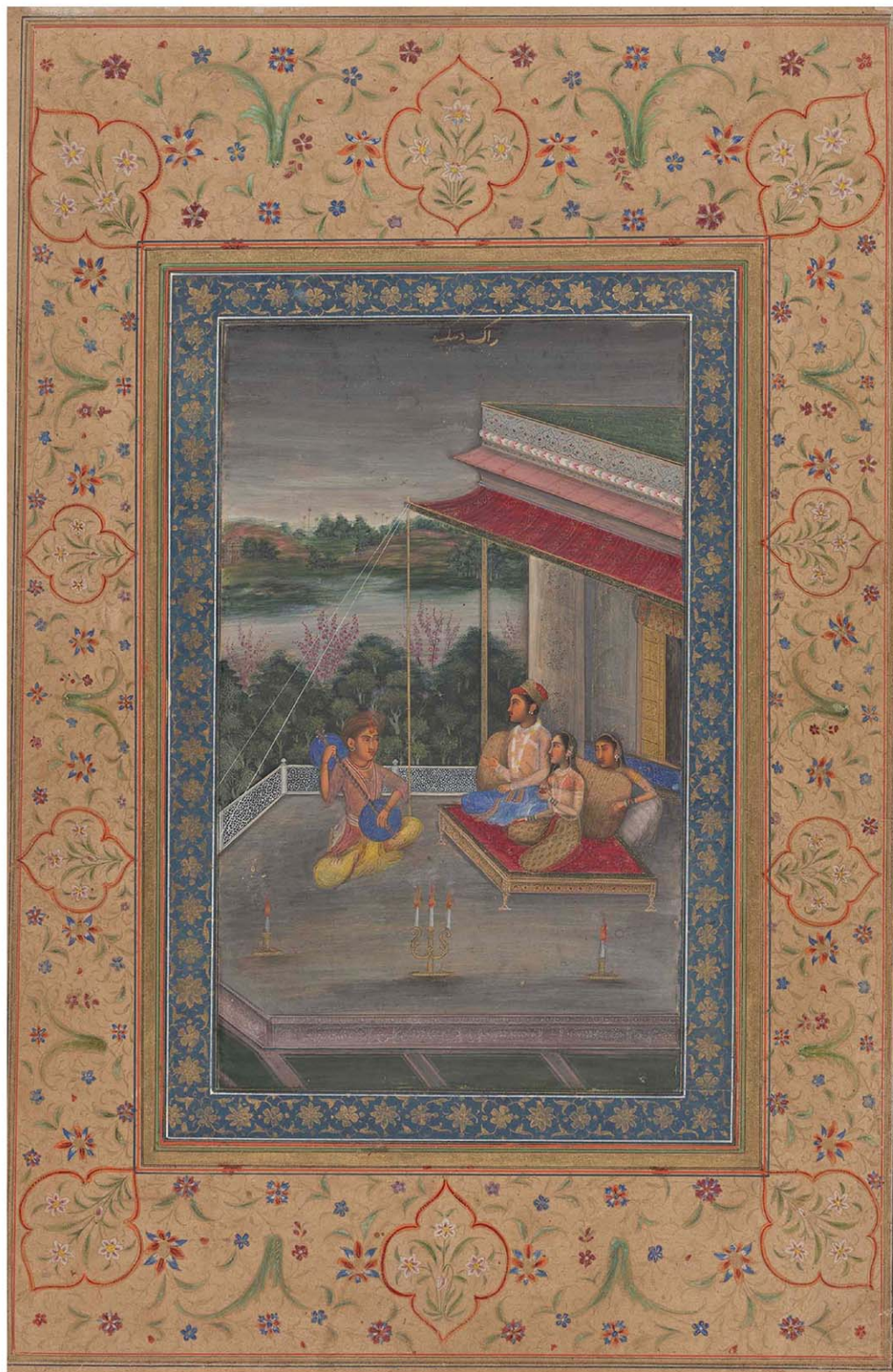
Imperial patronage can be seen in a number of portraits of both rulers and courtiers, especially from the Mughal period in India. The representation of kingship in a portrait of Padshah Aurangzeb (18), for example, shows him in the accoutrements of authority: the plumed turban, his

head surrounded by an illuminated aura; in his hands are the dagger and whisk. While the focus of the imperial portrait was on kingly splendour, portraits of courtiers take a more naturalist turn, such as those of Asalat Khan (1983.94.2) and Abdur Rahim (1983.94.11), the latter inscribed by the king, Jahangir.⁶

Identities mattered in the early modern period and, alongside portraits, the works of art at the YUAG introduce the names of famed artists from the Safavid court. Foremost among these was the 17th century master, Mu'in Musawwir (19), whose breathtaking paintings of birds are among the highlights of the Islamic art collection. The attention to a world observed, as in the contemporaneous Mughal portraits, marked work produced in the Safavid court. Thus, we see images of soulful dervishes and sensuous youth (20), all rendered in a manner that reveals their humanity, even as the image itself provides visual pleasure.

⁵Mohamad Reza Ghiasian, "The Historical Style of Painting for Shahrugh and Its Revival in the Dispersed Manuscript of *Majma' al-Tawarikh*", *Iranian Studies* 48/6, 2015, pp. 871–903.

⁶Kishwar Rizvi, "Introduction: Emotion and Subjectivity in an Early Modern Context", in *Affect, Emotion, and Subjectivity in Early Modern Muslim Empires: New Studies in Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Art and Culture*, edited by K. Rizvi, Leiden: Brill, 2017.



21 Raga Dipak, page from a *Ragamala*, circa late 17th century, Mughal dynasty. Opaque watercolour and gold on paper. 44.5 x 29.8 cm. Gift of Lauder Greenway, B.A. 1925, Ph.D. 1930, 1939.553

Among the distinguishing aspects of the Islamic art collections at Yale is the manner in which they highlight the intrinsic mutability of the genre. They are, in the deepest way, evidence of the assimilative nature of Islam itself—a religion comprised of many cultures, one that adapted to its diverse historical and geographic contexts. Thus, from the 17th and 18th centuries alone we can see a merging of Indic and Islamic tradition in the exquisite 17th century *Ragamala* paintings (21) made in the Mughal courtly milieu and the fascinating rendition of Christian subject matter, such as a large wall hanging showing the twelve apostles

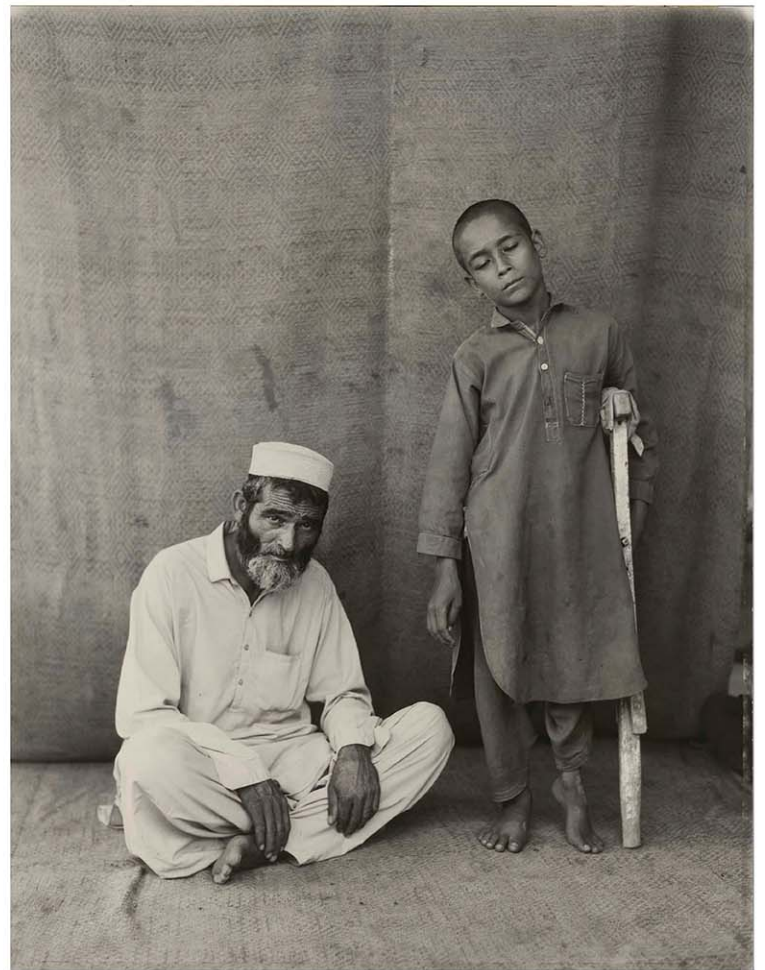
(22), made in Safavid Iran. Both objects point to the diverse and heterodox communities of the early modern period.

Modern and Contemporary Art from the Middle East and South Asia

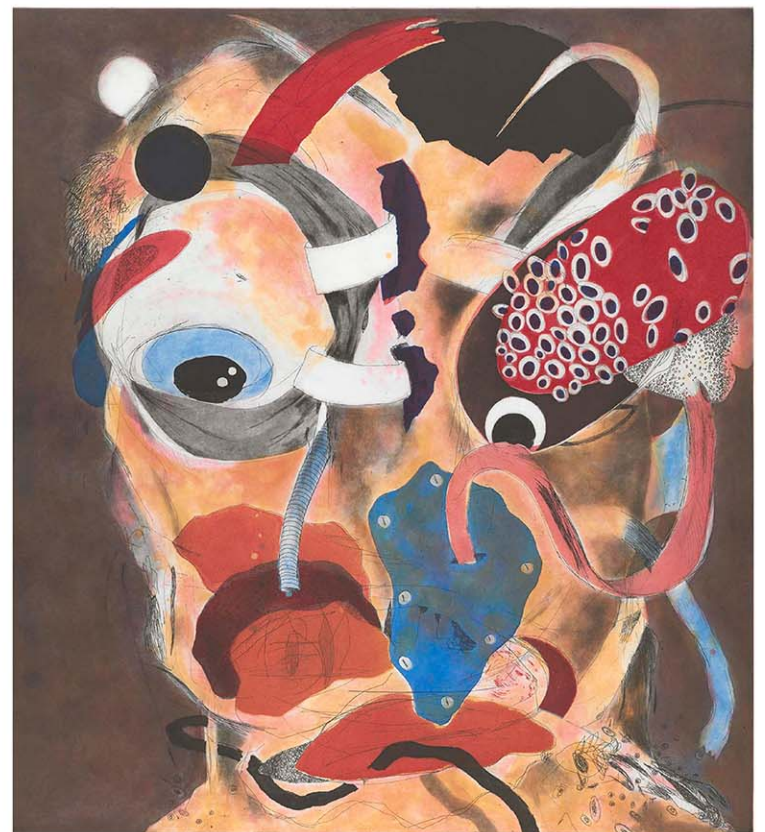
The Islamic art collections in the Department of Asian Art predate the 19th century, yet I would be remiss not to include works from the modern and contemporary periods, from Muslim majority countries in the Middle East in particular. Among the highlights, in the departments of mod-



22 Altar curtain with ten apostles and two evangelists, 18th–19th century, Zand or Qajar dynasty. Printed cotton. 204.5 x 77.8 cm. Hobart and Edward Small Moore Memorial Collection, Gift of Mrs William H. Moore, 1937.5198



23 Bahram and Muradi, in an Afghan refugee camp, Peshawar, Pakistan, 1996, Fazal Sheikh, American. Gelatin silver print. 53.4 x 45.5 cm. Janet and Simeon Braguin Fund, 2005.57.2



24 Untitled, 2008, Ahmed Alsoudani, Iraqi-American. Hardground etching, aquatint, spit bite, drypoint and roulette. 77.7 x 68.3 cm. Purchased with a gift from the Arthur and Constance Zeckendorf Foundation, 2012.112.1

ern and contemporary art, are portraits by the photographers, Said Nuseibeh (1992.53.170) and Fazal Sheikh (23); drawings by Khalil Gibran, the famed Lebanese poet-writer (1968.32.1); and film stills by Shirin Neshat (3). In addition, the gallery recently acquired the work of the young Iraqi artist, Ahmed Alsoudani (24), bringing to the fore the YUAG's commitment to presenting modernism as a complex and multifaceted, global phenomenon. As the collections of Islamic art make evident, the histories of the world are not limited to the contemporary period, but are a characteristic of an interconnected art history.