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Heidenreich, Anja

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Anja Heidenreich

# Light in Islam

Exhibiting selected  
objects from  
the Bumiller Collection

13.11.2023 - 30.09.2024



**THE  
BUMILLER  
COLLECTION**

Bamberg University Museum  
of Islamic Art



The exhibition and catalogue were curated by Dr. Anja Heidenreich

The project was brought to light 2023  
with students of Islamic Art and Archeology  
at the University of Bamberg.



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## Content

Introduction	4
'Heavenly lights': Astronomy in Islam	6
Light and optics: Ancient knowledge refurbished	8
Poetry and light: Candles in Arabic literature	10
Thus it is written: The Light Verse in the Qur'an	16
Illumination: Manuscripts get 'illuminated'	18
Oil lamps: The portable light	20
Lustre wares: The sun caught on ceramics	22
Objects of light	27



**Prayer rug**

Wool, 145 x 115 cm

Anatolia (Turkey), 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Instituto de Valencia de Don Juan Madrid (Inv. nr. 3858)

The design of this prayer rug emphasises the radiance of the light source. The symbolic mihrab arch separates the illuminated niche from the darker surroundings. Nevertheless, the garden, the lamp and the light are interwoven into a paradise on earth. A written cartouche in the upper field urges believers to pray.

# Introduction

Under the title 'Light in Islam', we selected objects from the permanent exhibition of the Bumiller Collection and curated them with a wider aspect, that allows insights into a general cultural history that expands the context of the single item.

By appreciating light, humans are connected to one another through time and place. It gives us a context of life and culture, that can be experienced without us having to rely primarily on the origin and dating of an items.

The existence of light as an elementary part of our earthly existence is a spiritual charge in all world religions. This 'original meaning' is based on the equation of the 'enigma of light' with the divine and can be traced without exception in both the written and in the natural religions.

The Muslim master craftsmen have repeatedly dealt with figurative metaphors and have implemented the theme of light in a variety of ways in their artfully designed objects.

In particular, the motif of the hanging 'oil lamp in the niche' permeates the architecture and handicrafts of Islamic culture. As a 'spiritual light', the mosque lamp not only illuminates the world, but also represents the divine illumination in the believer's heart. In addition to the 'Light Verse', which explicitly describes this lamp in the niche, the Qur'an contains numerous other texts on the subject.

The idea of the exhibition was developed during a seminar at Islamic Art and Archaeology at the University of Bamberg in 2023. Participants were Irmak Alpyürük, Sven Forstreuter, Henrik Hördemann and Hanna Köhler.

This catalogue reproduces the content of our wall panels, the information on the object labels and their photographs, combined with additional photos of "light-items" from worldwide collections. By setting up this little exhibition we hope to further publicise the collection and its enormous number of objects.



### **Globe**

*Bronze with silver inlays and engravings  
Persia, Timurid, dated 834 H (1430-31)*

*Diameter 10.5 cm*

*BM London (Inv. nr. 1896,0323.1)*

The rotating star globe shows sixty stars. Its precise execution reveals the work tool of a once renowned astronomer. It is therefore likely to locate the globe in one of the specially built observatories of the Timurid period.

# ‘Heavenly lights’: Astronomy in Islam

The overwhelming sight of the night sky has given rise to explanatory models in all cultures that underline the transcendence and connection of our human existence with the universe.

The theory that all beings flowed like light from one origin comes from Neoplatonism. This was an important prerequisite for the acceptance of astrology as a separate science in the Islamic culture.

Other basic scientific and philosophical assumptions were also borrowed from Sassanid Persia. Thus, Islamic astrology continued the theory of conjunctions between Saturn and Jupiter, which were supposed to bring about the exchange of people on the royal throne, the change of dynasties from one nation to the next, and a change of empires and religious denominations.

In the Qur<sup>ʾ</sup>an, the heavenly world and the creation of the universe are present in numerous verses. The phases of the moon, in turn, form the mathematical basis of the Islamic calendar and influence everyday religious practice in many ways.

The foundations of Islamic astronomy (Arabic *ʿilm al-nujūm*) lie equally in the scholarly knowledge of Antiquity as well as in the writings of Indian and Persian thinkers. A special feature, however, is a piece of knowledge that was taught by oral tradition from the desert peoples’ observations of the sky: the survival of the Bedouins at all times depended to a high degree on good orientation.

The concept of the scientific tripartite division presents itself to us as follows:

- 1.) *ʿilm al-falak* (arab.), the astronomically operated “science of the sphere” or *ʿilm al-haya* (arab.) “science of the external form”
- 2.) Tabular calendars as a more popular science used in daily life
- 3.) *ʿilm aḥkām al-nujūm* (arab.), the astrological “science of heavenly destiny”, which used the movement of the celestial bodies for prophecies.



The mathematician, optician and astronomer Ibn al-Haiṭam (965-1040), according to tradition, the inventor of the camera obscura (source: <https://historyofislam.com>)

# Light and optics: Ancient knowledge refurbished

Even in ancient times, Euclid and Ptolemy wrote important basic optical laws without seeing this as an independent field of research. Closely linked to our human cognitive skill of perception, optics represented a branch of ophthalmology on the one hand, and on the other hand its findings were incorporated into the lively discourses in physics, philosophy and astronomy.

Based on the ancient knowledge of many Western and Far Eastern civilizations, theories in the Islamic world were intensively questioned and further developed through series of experiments. In the newly founded palace city of Baghdad, where research was strongly promoted by the Abbasid dynasty in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, scholars finally refuted for the first time the traditional theory that the eye itself could emit rays.

The translator and researcher Qusṭa ibn Lūqā al-Baʿlabakkī (820-912/13) also worked in Baghdad at this time. He described the 'science of rays' as the most important. His contemporary Abū Yūsuf Yaʿqūb bin Ishāq al-Kindī (known as Alkindus, d. ca. 870) wrote the first fundamental Islamic work on optics, which has come down to us in its Latin translation *De radiis stellarum*.

Alkindus was able to present a coherent theory that "everything in the world emits rays in all directions, so that the entire world is filled with them." This new approach had a strong influence on furthering the history of science. It obviously spread through the 'Book of Optics' (Arabic *Kitāb al-Manāẓir*) presented in 1010 by Abū ʿAlī al-Ḥasan ibn al-Haiṭam (965-1040), which was popularized by Latin (around 1100) and Italian (14<sup>th</sup> century) copies which made their way into the Christian Middle Ages.

The numerous preserved Islamic mirrors, which were (also) needed for reflection in optical experiments, are seen as a very unique interface between science and art. The Bumiller Collection holds more than 200 Islamic and Asian bronze mirrors. Their richly decorated reverses show decorations with political and religious connotations, but probably also convey general ideas of transcendence and mysticism.



**Maqāmāt of al-Ḥarīrī**

*Mid-13<sup>th</sup> century*

*Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris*

*(MS Arabe 3929 fol. 179 recto)*

The scene depicts a banquet with two bronze candlesticks illuminating the ambience. Their central position in the picture structure gives them an allegorical function.

# Poetry and light: Candles in Arabic literature

by Henrik Hördemann

The theme of light has a long tradition in Arabic and Persian poetry. In particular, candles and candlesticks have been a recurring theme in Arabic literature over the centuries. Such candle poems can be classified within the genre of *waṣf* – mostly short descriptive poems or epigrams (Arabic: *waṣf* = description).

The emergence of the *waṣf* genre in Arabic literature dates back to the 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century AD. Although the description of natural phenomena, animals, or landscapes was already a fixed thematic element in Arabic and even pre-Islamic poetry, short poems describing objects that can stand alone began to be written only from the 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century onwards.<sup>1</sup>

Candle descriptions as poems are almost as old as the *waṣf* genre itself in Arabic literature and can be traced back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD.<sup>2</sup>

Candle poems enjoyed great popularity, as evidenced by the large number of surviving works. Hundreds of candle poems from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries have been transmitted through the Diwans and anthologies of Arabic authors alone. Furthermore, the popularity of the theme is evident in the fact that anthologies and encyclopedic works of the time repeatedly dedicate entire chapters to the transmission of candle poems, collecting famous and selected candle poems and descriptions.<sup>3</sup>

The candle poems in these anthologies could take on very different forms. Whether as riddle poems, pure descriptions, or ambiguous poems certain characteristics of candles recur in these descriptions, often even with contradictory meanings. The qualities of the candle are also often equated with the qualities of a beloved person.

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<sup>1</sup> Schoeler 2010/2011; Arazi 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Diem 2023 15 ff.

<sup>3</sup> van Gelder 1997.

Candles in their long and straight form were often compared to the slender figure of the beloved or to spears with golden tips. For example, the flame of the candle represents the face of the beloved, which illuminates the space for the lyrical self at a banquet or during a social gathering (*maḡlis* pl. *maḡālis*).

In candle poetry, the connection to a *maḡlis* is often implied, which suggests that candles were often used in such communal settings. For example, candles are often described as confidants or drinking companions in a communal gathering. The exact nature of such *maḡālis* is difficult to determine, as the term itself merely describes a gathering of people, and such gatherings could have very different functions. The image of the *maḡlis* depicted in the poems includes depictions of wine consumption, literature, good company, or the presence of loved ones.

Frequently, the relationship with the beloved in Arabic poetry is characterized by an impossibility expressed as suffering love. In such a context, the wax tears of the candle are also used.

Another recurring motif in candle poetry is the reversal and juxtaposition of circumstances. For example, there is the motif of revival through beheading – which refers to trimming the wick – or the comparison with aging hair. The wick is compared to hair, which turns white in youth and black in old age.

A candle poem by Abū al-Qāsim al-Muṭarriz (d. 439 H./1047-1048 AD):  
[in Basīṭ]

وللشموع عيون كلّما نظرتُ  
من كلّ مرّهفة الأعطاف كالغصن الـ  
إنّي لأعجب منها وهي وادعة  
تظلمت من يديها أنجم الغسق  
مّيّاد لكته عارٍ من الورق  
تبلى، وعيشتها من ضربة العنق

*“The candles possess eyes, each time they gaze  
The stars of darkness complain about them  
They are all of slender build like the bending  
Branch, but naked of leaves  
Truly I am amazed by her, how calmly  
She fades, and her life comes from a blow to the neck.”*

Candles in the 11<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, if of good quality, were made of beeswax and were thus a luxury item. Beeswax has the advantage over other fuels such as tallow and oil in that it produces little soot when burning and does not emit unpleasant odors. Such candles were especially placed in elaborately decorated candlesticks by the wealthy and the elite.

The majority of candlesticks during the period from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries had a similar shape. Candlesticks with a round, tapering base and a short cylinder as a candle holder were widespread during this period throughout from Khorasan to Egypt. These candlesticks are mostly made of copper or brass and decorated with inlays. The base socket of the candlesticks is hollow, and the actual cylindrical candle holder is mounted on the base with a counter screw. The technique of inlaying – the incorporation of differently colored or more noble metals into a base metal – had been known since antiquity, but inlaying experienced a veritable heyday from the 12<sup>th</sup> century throughout the region from Khorasan to Egypt.

Starting from the region of Khorasan, the trend of incorporating silver or copper wires and plates into a base form, usually made of brass, spread from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Particularly Mosul and later Damascus developed into centers of metalwork with inlays. In addition to candlesticks, a variety of other objects such as water basins, jugs, Quran boxes, or boxes for writing utensils were elaborately and skillfully inlaid.<sup>4</sup>

One of the earliest examples of this development is the candlestick from the Bumiller Collection with the suggested lion heads. With its compressed shape, short neck, and wide, solid-looking base, the candlestick belongs to the type that became widespread from the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The protruding round elevations with engraved circles on the upper hemisphere show similarities to magnificent candlesticks from the Aga Khan Museum and the Louvre, which are adorned with lion heads and decorated with similar octagonal motifs.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Ward 1993, 35 f. 74 f.; Behrens-Abouseif 2021, 53 f.; Tabbaa 1987, 109; Allan 1985, 260.

<sup>5</sup> Likewise in the Freer Gallery of Art, Objekt Nr. 51.17; see: Atil et al. 1985, 95. More candlesticks of this group can be located in the David Collection Copenhagen, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Museum of Islamic Art Cairo and the Al-Sabah Collection in Kuwait. The examples from the Freer Gallery, the MIA in Cairo and the Al-Sabah Collection are almost identical to the candlestick in the Louvre.

In particular, the “duck candlestick” in the Louvre bears a great resemblance to our object. While the ducks are missing on the upper edge of the Bumiller collection candlestick, the division of the base edge is exactly the same: a top parade of lions is followed by a band of text, and then a three-row area of hexagons, another band of text, and at the bottom again a band of lions.

In its form and quality of execution, however, the candlestick differs from the magnificent specimens. Unlike the prestigious examples in the Louvre and the Aga Khan Museum, the candlestick does not taper upwards, but is rather barrel-shaped, much coarser in execution, and less decorated. Also, the lion heads are not immediately recognizable as such. Such a difference may possibly be attributed to the different processing of the base metal since, unlike in the two major museums, the candlestick was not hammered but cast.

The Bumiller candlestick is made of copper and has not been inlaid. The verdigris has been removed by previous owners in some places, explaining the difference in coloration. Based on the similarities to the other two candlesticks, the Bumiller candlestick can be dated to approximately 1150-1220 AD and attributed to the region of Khorasan (more precisely perhaps around Herat, Afghanistan).

However, since the object exhibits differences in manufacturing processes and much more modest decorations in coarser execution, yet at the same time shows great similarity to the one in the Louvre, it is also conceivable that this is a candlestick that emulates the luxury goods of the elite in its design but was intended to be less expensive in its production.

Another hypothesis could be that the object here is a forgery, especially since the inscriptions on the candlestick as well as the decor are suspiciously rough. The inscription could be a repeating *shahāda*, but in that case, there would be several spelling mistakes as well as inconsistencies in the script. The extremely strong resemblance to the Louvre candlestick could also be read as evidence for the forgery hypothesis.

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اللَّهُ نُورُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ مِثْلُ نُورِهِ كَمِشْكَاةٍ  
فِيهَا مِصْبَاحٌ الْمِصْبَاحُ فِي زُجَاجَةٍ الزُّجَاجَةُ  
كَأَنَّهَا كَوْكَبٌ دُرِّيٌّ يُوقَدُ مِنْ شَجَرَةٍ مُبَارَكَةٍ  
زَيْتُونَةٍ لَّا شَرْقِيَّةٍ وَلَا غَرْبِيَّةٍ يَكَادُ زَيْتُهَا  
يُضِيءُ وَلَوْ لَمْ تَمْسَسْهُ نَارٌ نُورٌ عَلَى نُورٍ  
يَهْدِي اللَّهُ لِنُورِهِ مَن يَشَاءُ وَيَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ الْأَمْثَالَ ل  
لِنَاسٍ وَاللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ

# Thus it is written: The Light Verse in the Qur'an

Human perception of light has triggered religious principles and philosophical ideas in almost all cultures. The contrast between light and shadow has most often been associated with the concept of good and evil.

In the Qur'an, light appears with a symbolic function in numerous places. A complete sura (Sura 24) with its 63 verses even has the heading 'an-Nūr' (Arabic: the light). The Light Verse (24:35) contained therein is of central importance for the interpretation of light and light sources in Islam. It is one of the most famous passages in the Qur'an. The language seems archaic, enigmatic, replete with parables and symbols.

Verse 35 compares the light of God to the light of a lamp in a niche. The olive tree mentioned represents a tree of paradise or a tree on a hill that is illuminated by sunlight not only from the east or west, but from all sides.

In Sufism (Islamic mysticism) the Light Verse serves as an important source of inspiration. The philosophical treatise 'The Niche of Lights' (*Miškāt al-anwār*) comes from al-Ġazzālī.

Being so symbolically charged, it is not surprising that this passage from the *Qur'an* was often implemented as artistic calligraphy and even adorned buildings in a monumental version. They can be found in a cartouche or as a long scroll at numerous mosques, for example at the Süleymaniye Mosque and the Nuruosmaniye Mosque in Istanbul.

## The Light Verse (Surah 24, Verse 35)

*Mustafa Khattab, The Clear Quran (Lombard 2016)*

Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth.  
His light is like a niche in which there is a lamp,  
the lamp is in a crystal,  
the crystal is like a shining star,  
lit from the oil of a blessed olive tree,  
located neither to the east nor the west,  
whose oil would almost glow, even without being touched by fire.  
Light upon light!  
Allah guides whoever He wills to His light.  
And Allah sets forth parables for humanity.  
For Allah has perfect knowledge of all things.



### Prayer book

*Al-Ġazūlī (d. 869/1465), Dalā'il al-hayrāt*  
Iran, around 1800

135 sheets, partly illuminated paper, black and red ink, modern red-brown leather binding, 13 x 20 cm  
Bumiller Collection (BC-5431)

The present copy contains a representation of the two sanctuaries of Mecca and Medina on sheets 19b-20a. Parallels can be found in pilgrim handbooks and on Ottoman ceramic panels.

The smooth but thin paper, brittle at the edges, and the not entirely deep black ink suggest a date to the 18th or early 19th century.

# Illumination: Manuscripts get ‘illuminated’

In manuscript production, illumination refers to the application of golden, or distinctly coloured, elements and highlighting or adorning text passages. This tradition is not genuinely Islamic, but rather arises from a general appreciation of the Holy Scriptures in all the scriptural religions.

Even in the oldest surviving Qurʾān manuscripts, parts of the text are highlighted by different colors, gilding, rosettes, dots, etc. The illuminated passages stand out as ‘symbols of light’. Over the centuries, they increasingly transformed the manuscripts into valuable individual objects that, as status symbols, illustrated the financial power and piety of their donors and buyers.

To produce golden illuminations, gold is pulverized and liquefied within a binding agent to form a tincture. This ‘golden ink’ is then applied with a brush or a quill pen and brought to a high shine with a busy polishing stone. Gold’s chemical properties protect it from fading and corrosion, so that many of the old manuscript pages still seem ‘enlightened’ to us today.

Over the centuries, in addition to the magnificent volumes originating from a religious context, works of Persian poetry with their epic traditions and scientific treatises were also illuminated. They were given a special status by adding gold painting. There were also official documents from a courtly or private context, such as marriage certificates or the *kashkūl*, a kind of inherited family register of wealthy Persian families.

Illuminating decorations permeate all historical arts of the book and follow temporal and regional styles. They also have a permanent place in modern art.



# Oil lamps: The portable light

Oil lamps are among the earliest portable means of lighting in human civilization. Functionally, they consist of a fuel container and a burning point that indicates the position of the wick. Vegetable or animal oil burns in a small flame to create artificial light. The occurrence of oil lamps made of ceramic and stone can be traced back well into pre-Islamic times.

The Bumiller Collection has one of the world's most extensive collections of such objects from the Islamic world. Many of them are decorated, for example with Kufi inscriptions, knobs and crowns. In the large group of early Islamic bronze lamps, decorative elements often resemble parts of birds' bodies.

Persia in particular had a long tradition of producing vessels with zoomorphic shapes or set pieces. In addition to the bird theme, other animals such as camels, pigs and mice can also be seen in the lamps. Other groups of lamps are formally based on older models made of stone or ceramic and imitate their material-related shapes before they in turn became models for ceramic replicas.

Technically, the countless bronze lamps can be divided into two different manufacturing processes: a large group is made from a single casting, while the others are assembled.

There are countless possibilities for the typological classification of individual objects: an open or closed body, the design of the wick holder or the shape of the handles or feet can serve to form groups that may indicate a certain origin or period of production.

The main factors for the formal development and change of both stone and bronze lamps were the previous original forms, technological advances and new possibilities that arose from other materials. External influences such as trade relations and local developments also contributed to the change in oil lamps. Thanks to this 'joy in design', oil lamps are among the key finds in art historical and archaeological research.



### **Panel painting with the Last Supper**

*Tempera on wood*

*Presumably Pere Teixidor, 1435-1445, 115 x 327 x 8.5 cm*

*Solsona Museum (MDCS 16)*

The table utensils from a Catalan table from the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century are illustrated in the details of the depiction. The vessel shapes, typical of the Gothic period, are shown as magnificent 'Manises ware': Cobalt blue decoration including the Gothic lettering 'Ave Maria' is combined with the originally Islamic technique of lustre painting.

# Lustre wares:

## The sun caught on ceramics

This special ceramic type is named after its reflective painting. Only a few workshops were able to master the technically demanding manufacturing process. Scientific investigation can help to trace technical parallels and direct connections between different production sites or even workshops.

The technical knowledge of lustre ware production was passed on within specialised potter families. In times of peace, production and sales flourished. If there was political unrest or even war, master workshops sometimes migrated and took their knowledge with them. The manufacturers were often supported at their new locations because rulers liked to see themselves as patrons and tried to control the production of valuables by the state.

Decorations covering the surface of the vessels allow stylistic analysis and chronological classification. Epigraphs can often be found among the motifs, executed as abstract decorative elements or readable written decoration. They convey blessings, excerpts from poetic epics and occasionally signatures of craftsmen or dedications to rulers.

Lustre wares usually travelled from east to west and north as cargo on merchant ships that were mainly loaded with primary goods. The production sites and historical sources known to date provide a good overview of the former international trade routes. A perfectly organised dealer network operated across cultural and language boundaries and brought the goods through offices and middlemen to the buyer.

Trade in luxury ceramics from the Orient right into the centres of the Latin Christian territories was never subject to political or religious restrictions. Strong demand from small nobility and patrician circles meant that the magnificent bowls and jugs increasingly travelled to North, Central and Eastern Europe in the late Middle Ages.

The exotic and prestigious objects were considered forgery-proof and were often showcased at receptions and banquets, as can be seen in late Gothic and Renaissance panel paintings. In archaeological contexts they are often found together with other valuable objects. This testifies to their esteem in the households of the wealthy medieval classes.

The Bumiller Collection has pieces from various important production sites, such as an early Samarra-style bowl, ornately decorated chandeliers from Kashan, and examples from the Christian factories of Manises (Valencia). There, too, the artistry of the companies would be unthinkable without the presence of Muslim potters who immigrated from Andalusia.





# **Objects of light**

selected from the Bumiller Collection

## **Mirror (without inv. n°)**

*Cast-Bronze  
China, modern*

In all technical aspects, this mirror follows its historical counterparts.

The reflective effect is achieved through the intense polishing of the surface, rather than using deposits of mercury vapor, as seen in Western mirrors.

A central suspension cord on the decorated reverse is used for handling, similar to older models.

The object is carefully preserved in a little box to protect the polished surface from damage.



### **Mirror with handle (BC 652)**

*Cast-Bronze  
Iran, approx. 13<sup>th</sup> century  
Length 15 x Width 7.5 x Height 0.5 cm*

The small round handheld mirror was cast together with a roughly profiled handle and, presumably at a later date, perforated with two holes.

The back is adorned with meticulous decoration featuring five uniform facial masks arranged in circles, in front of a background of a grid of equilateral triangles.

Both the highly stylized faces with their three-pointed crowns and the background design have parallels in objects from the Ghaznavid tradition.

Mirrors of this kind might have been used for magical rituals.



## **Mirror (BC-982)**

*Cast-Bronze  
Presumably China  
Thickness 1 cm, Diameter 13.3 cm*

This circular mirror with a raised edge lacks a handle; instead, its central drilling can be interpreted as an attachment for a cord. The cast relief decoration on its back shows a dynamic representation of four facing pairs of animals. In between, fruits, leaves and vines fill the surface and create an overall motif.

The execution seems somewhat slightly faded and is worn on the raised parts, also the edge of the mirror is broken at one point.

The condition of the object gives the appearance of it having been in use for a long time.



### **Candlestick (BC-6186)**

*Cast-Bronze, engraved and punched  
Khorasan (Iran), 12<sup>th</sup> century  
Height 21.6 cm, Diameter 17 cm*

This candlestick, with its heavy, cylindrical base and short shaft, belongs to a certain group characterised by a frieze with octagons including lion head decoration.

These details are clearly inspired by the courtly fashion of the Khorasan region in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, where the object, as a less splendid example produced by casting, must have been offered for the wealthier middle class.

Typological comparative pieces, albeit crafted in a much higher quality, are preserved in the Aga Khan Museum and the Louvre.



## **Decorative plaque (BC-5278)**

*Molded clay brick with firing traces  
Origin and dating unclear  
Length 34 x Width 23 x Thickness 3.5 cm*

This small plaque shows a decorative design that has been imprinted using a moulding technique. The impression on the already imperfect panel is blurry, indicating a serial production.

Unusually, the poor firing suggests that it was probably caused by uncontrolled heat source rather than a more formalised kiln.

The motif depicts a hanging lamp in a mihrab niche. This is a highly religiously charged motif directly related to the Light Verse (24:35) in the Qur'an. In contrast, the decorative script reproduces verses 1-4 of Surah 97, concluding with the phrase "God, the Exalted, speaks the truth." According to traditional interpretation, this Surah speaks of the night when the *Qur'an* was revealed. Reciting it is said to be rewarded by God as if the reader had fasted during the month of Ramadan and spent the night in worship.

The function of the plaque remains unclear, although it might have been used to embellish the interior of a private home or room.

The object, which has been broken several times, has been professionally restored for our exhibition.



## **Prayer book (BC-5431)**

*Al-Ġazūlī (d. 869/1465), Dalā'il al-ḥayrāt, Iran, ca. 1800  
135 pages, paper partly illuminated, black and red ink,  
modern reddish-brown leather binding  
13 x 20 cm*

The present copy contains on folio 19b-20a a depiction of Mecca and Medina. The main parts of the fine drawing are illuminated.

While during earlier periods illuminated zones were meant as a 'symbol of light', over the centuries, they increasingly transformed the manuscripts into valuable individual objects that, as status symbols, illustrated the financial power and piety of their donors and buyers.

To produce the golden illuminations, gold is pulverized and liquefied within a binding agent to form a tincture. This 'golden ink' is then applied with a brush or a quill pen and brought to a high shine with a busy polishing stone. The chemical properties of gold protect it from fading and corrosion, so that many of the old manuscript pages still seem 'enlightened' to us today.

Parallels to the prayer book can be found in pilgrimage guides and on Ottoman ceramic panels.

The smooth but thin paper, fragile at the rim, and the not entirely deep black ink suggest a dating to the 18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup> century.



## **Gold lustre bowl (BC-5789)**

*Earthenware, tin-glazed and lustre painted  
'Samarra style', 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century  
Height 4.2 cm, Diameter 13 cm*

This gold lustre bowl has an S-shaped profile and is over-all painted with an animal motif (hare) and hatched cartouches. The rim shows aligned segmental arches, the underside the dot-and-stripe motif. These two elements are considered a typical design for a ceramic group of the so-called 'Samarra style'.

The name follows one of the main gold lustre production centres, that was established in Iraq during the 9<sup>th</sup> century, when the cities of Bagdad and Samarra served as residence of the caliphal court.

Potters migrated, after the dynasty's decline, moving towards both the east and west. Without formal changes, production of this kind of lustreware persisted until the early 10<sup>th</sup> century, primarily supplying a court-type environment.



### **Gold lustre bowl (BC 6000)**

*Earthenware tin-glazed and lustre painted  
Kashan (Iran), 13<sup>th</sup> century  
Height 9,2 cm, Diameter 20.5 cm*

This deep, hemispherical bowl rests on a foot ring and terminates in a horizontal rim. Both the rim and its cavetto are richly decorated with epigraphic bands. The bowl's interior depicts two seated individuals facing each other.

Gold lustre production in the Kashan region of Iran stands as a technical and formal pinnacle in the history of Islamic ceramics. The distinctly Asian physiognomy of the figures mirrors an ideal of beauty that was current before the Mongol conquests of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.



### **Gold lustre charger (BC-0026)**

*Earthenware, tin-glazed and lustre painted  
Manises (Valencia, Spain), 1690-1725  
Height 8.1 cm, Diameter 39.2 cm*

This flat, magnificent charger with a central omphalos is decorated with copper-red lustre-painting and cobalt-blue elements. In the shiny lustre, there are striped leaves and three panther birds (Pardalot) running inside around the hump.

On the wide rim, four three-stemmed plants in blue dominate the background.

The 'Pardalot group' is a typical early modern design of the family workshops in Manises.

Due to its flat profile, this object can be classified into a group that was produced from approximately 1690 to 1725. Ceramics of this type were widely traded.



## **Polycandelon (BC-775)**

*Cast-Bronze*

*Presumably Andalusia or North Africa, 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century*

*Thickness 0.5 cm, Diameter 24.8 cm*

This flat bronze disc was cast with openwork decoration, including the delicate knobs on the outer edge. The small loops on the upper side served for attaching chains. Originally, funnel shaped glass lamps were placed in the six ring-shaped openings, thereby multiplying the light of the individual lamps into a so-called polycandelon.

Multiflame 'lamp discs' of this kind are understood to originate from the western Mediterranean region. They were an integral part of lighting concepts in bigger and often public spaces, like mosques and palaces.

These discs were made in a variety of sizes and were sometimes combined together to form magnificent multi-layered lamps, with terrace-like arrangements.



### **Part of a suspended lamp (BC-3533)**

*Bronze, sheet metal  
Presumably Iran/Afghanistan  
Thickness 0,2 cm, Diameter 18.7 cm*

This thin bronze disc is believed to originate from a late medieval hanging lamp composed of numerous sheets.

Typically, these are intricate mesh patterns that perforate the surfaces using fine metalwork techniques. The results not only allowed light to be shed in all directions but also created an elegant play of shadows on ceilings and walls.

The fretwork depicts a six-petaled rosette. Remnants of a suspension can be found at the top.

The lamp sheet was acquired together with a matching plain bronze disc.



### **Oil lamp (BC-6345)**

*Cast-Bronze with inlay  
Afghanistan, 11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> century  
Length 33 x Width 16.9 x Height 27 cm*

This large lamp is cast as a single piece of bronze. A curved spout extends from its spherical oil container to the open, broadly rimmed burner. The opposing ring handle is crowned with a bird, whose tail serves as a thumb rest. A sturdy trumpet foot with an additional pierced decoration supports the expansive structure. Various decorative elements made of inlaid braided bands adorn the lamp, giving it a splendid character.

The object is likely to have originated from a Ghaznavid workshop in the region of present-day Afghanistan.



### **Miniature stand (BC-5950) with oil lamp (BC-5951)**

*Cast-Bronze*

*Iran?*

*Height 14 cm, Diameter 5.8 cm*

*Height 3.9 cm x Length 5.9 cm*

This three-legged lamp stand raises from a bell-shaped basis, elegantly designed with large bosses and inlay work. From there, a multiple profiled shaft leads to the horizontal dish, on which a movable oil lamp can be securely placed in the recessed surface.

The piece entered the collection along with the spherical miniature lamp, but proof is lacking tht the two belong together.

It could be a finely crafted childrens' toy.



### **Triple-flamed oil lamp (BC-890)**

*Cast-Bronze*

*Iran, 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century*

*Length 22.8 x Width 9.9 x Height 9.2 cm*

This flat and elongated lamp is characterised by its triple-flamed wick holder. Special features are the remarkable thumb-rest, that forms the end of the lid, and an attached ring holder. A flat metal sheet covers the whole width of the oil container. Its front part can be lifted up through hinges for filling the lamp.

The top is completely decorated by an openwork pattern of vines. On the vertical outer walls of the body a kufic inscription ("Blessings for its owner") was engraved.

On the bottom, the vessel rests on three slender legs that end in pointed feet, showing stylized claws, a motif common in small standing bronze objects since ancient times.



## **Oil lamp (BC-1790)**

*Cast-Bronze*

*Presumably Iran, 8<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century*

*Length 17.5 x Width 8.2 x Height 6.6 cm*

This elegant oil lamp is a good example of a distinctly minimalist design in Islamic craftsmanship. Its clear and basic shape is developed from a flat-spherical body, which opens at the front into a long, wick-shaped spout with a wick holder. Both the spout and the oil container remain completely uncovered at the top. Opposite the spout, a ring handle with a flat extended handle plate is attached.

Similar to the green glazed ceramic oil lamp (BC-595), this well-balanced object gives the impression of a highly stylised bird figure.



## **Double-flame oil lamp (BC-2015)**

*Cast-Bronze*

*Presumably Iran, 11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> century?*

*Length 16.6 x Width 7.3 x Height 12.3 cm*

The tall, bulging lamp captivates the observer with two gracefully extended spouts that open at the top of the burners. These wick holders are offset from the body of the lamp by moulded ridges. The opening of the oil bowl is covered by a hinged lid, probably not part of the original design but a more recent addition.

A handle with a ring loop and crest-like thumb rest, along with the tall legs ending in hoof-like tips, gives the lamp a particular elegance.

In all, this object also shows a direct reference to elements from the animal kingdom, placing it in the realm of the so-called composite beings (camel/bird).



### **Oil lamp in animal shape (BC-1527)**

*Cast-Bronze  
Iran, 8<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century  
Length 12.2 x Width 3.7 x Height 5.2 cm*

This lamp is designed in the form of a quadruped, with the filling bowl for oil placed on its back, and the mouth serving as burner. The short legs end with slender paws. Engraving decorates the neck and both sides of the abdomen. Only the whiskers and pointed ears suggest a specific species, such as a mouse.

This category of quadrupeds belongs to animal-shaped lamps. The Persian region, in particular, had a long tradition of producing vessels with animal like forms.



## **Triple-flame oil lamp (BC-1512)**

*Soapstone*

*Iran, 8<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century*

*Length 14.2 x Width 8.9 x Height 3.6 cm*

Basin-shaped forms, as seen in this object, are rare among Islamic oil lamps. This is especially so in the case of soapstone examples, on which the unassuming design with perforations and/or incised patterns appear archaic to the observer.

It is noteworthy that this particular craft of stone carving and its timeless products can be traced back to the antiquity and have continued, largely unchanged, to the present day.

Archaic stone lamps of this kind undoubtedly inspired Islamic craftsmen in the design of basin-shaped lighting devices made from ceramics or metal (see BC-890).



### **Double-flame oil lamp (BC-273)**

*Earthenware with lead glaze  
Egypt, 9<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century  
Length 8.6 x Width 5.1 x Height 5.1 cm*

This oil lamp has a basin-shaped body. From its top with a moulded decoration, an attached filling spout protrudes upwards, originally linked with a (now broken) handle. The nozzles of both burners in this example are damaged.

Relief-decorated oil lamps such as this form part of a typological group of archaeological finds from the potteries of Old Cairo.

Other examples, differing only in the details of their sculptural decoration, can be found in the collections of other international museums.



## **Oil lamp (BC-150)**

*Frithware with alkaline glaze  
Ar-Raqqa (Northern Syria), 13<sup>th</sup> century  
Length 11.4 x Width 11.3 x Height 8 cm*

This object presents a simple potter's design, with an extended spout and a middle wick holder on a goblet-like base. The painting makes it an example of one of the more decorative pieces, whilst also functioning as an everyday object.

A pseudo-epigraphic frieze surrounds the outer edge, and groups of finer arabesques are set inside. These black underglazed ornaments are covered by a transparent glaze. It is only where the glaze is applied in a thicker layer that the colour transforms into a bright turquoise.

The lamp is a typical product of the pottery town of ar-Raqqa (in today's northern Syria), where workshops have been archaeologically researched.



## **Oil lamp (BC-219)**

*Frithware with lead glaze  
Egypt?, 11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> century  
Length 9.6 x Width 9.2 x Height 4.7 cm*

This type of a simple oil lamp with an extended wick holder is an example of functional and basic lighting device.

Despite being geographically and chronologically widespread, these lamps can be distinguished by their physical proportions (diameter and height) as well as by their material and decorative style.

The example exhibited here is overlain with a mottled lead glaze that imitates Chinese glaze trends.

Especially in Old Cairo, people were well acquainted with the originals, thanks to the intense trade with South-East and East Asia. These imports continually provided potters with inspiration.



### **Oil lamp (BC-595)**

*Earthenware with lead glaze*

*Iran, 8<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century*

*Length 13 x Width 5.8 x Height 5.4 cm*

This stout lamp comprises an almost spherical oil container with a long, wick-shaped spout. On the opposite side to the spout, the potter attached an artistic handle in the form of a ring with a diagonally, pulled back thumb rest forming a leaf.

"Leaf veins" can be seen scratched into the glaze. When viewed from the side, the handle also resembles a bird's crest, with the oil container appearing as the bird's body.

Typologically similar specimens can be found among bronze lamps. The copper-green surface colour might allude to the much more expensive bronze lamps.



## **Balustrade grille (BC-4262)**

*Sandstone, historical tar drops  
Region Maharashtra, possibly Aurangabad (West India),  
late 17<sup>th</sup> century  
Length 71 x Height 34 x Thickness 4 cm*

The grille was crafted as an intricate network within a rectangular frame, and its bars are accentuated with fine incised lines.

Mortar residues can be found on three sides, with only the upper edge ending in a rounded profile. It is possible that tar dripped from above, very likely from a roof, in its historical position onto the grille.

Low grilles - in comparison to window grilles - are components of garden architecture, especially in pavilions and bay windows. They limited open-air spaces and provided changing light effects.

Fine stone grilles can be found in the monumental architecture of Mughal-era India.

Network motifs of this kind were popular during the rule of Aurangzeb.







