

MUSEUM FÜR ISLAMISCHE KUNST

STEFAN WEBER

RIGHT PAGE

Pergamonmuseum, Museum für Islamische Kunst, painted wood panelling from the reception room of a Christian merchant, dated 1600/01 and 1603, Aleppo, Syria, 2.50 × 35 m

The Museum für Islamische Kunst (Museum of Islamic Art) is Germany's only museum specialising in the art, culture, and archaeology of Muslim societies, and is also the oldest and one of the most important museums of its kind in the Western world. It describes, in chronological and geographical order, the artistic and cultural developments of the Islamic cultures in the southern and eastern Mediterranean, Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Iran, and central Asia as far as the Indian subcontinent. Alongside finds from important archaeological sites, it displays the applied arts; technically ambitious works in ceramic, metal, and wood; jewellery and rare illuminated manuscripts as well as examples of calligraphy, one of the most important classical art forms in the Islamic world (Fig. 325). Its collection of centuries-old carpets, whose colours and brilliance are still captivating, enjoys an international reputation (Fig. 327).

The museum's main attraction is its unique collection of architectural elements, which offers visitors immediate insights into the concepts of space in a wide variety of periods and places. That is particularly true of the monumental façade of the Mshatta Palace in Jordan from the middle of the 8th century (Fig. 320). It is the largest monument of Islamic art in any museum and a cornerstone in the formulation of a new conception of art in the early Islamic period. Along its 33-metre-long façade, a broad spectrum of decorative traditions from Late Antiquity unfolds, synthesising them to form the foundations for the artistic developments of the centuries that followed. The most important architectural elements also include the archaeological findings from Samarra, Iraq, the residence of the caliphs, from the 9th century, with their large stucco panels; the enormous 13th-century prayer niches of radiant ceramic from Kashan, Iran (Fig. 326), and Konya, Turkey; or the 14th-century filigreed wood carvings composed of star-shaped elements from a dome of the Alhambra in Granada, Spain. They offer insight into the artfully designed worlds of Muslim peoples and the Christian and Jewish groups who lived in them as well. One impressive testimony to such shared cultural experience is the painted wood panelling from the reception hall of a Christian merchant from Aleppo, Syria, from the very early 17th century, which has been completely preserved (Fig. 319). This famous room, with its magnificent paintings in the style of Islamic book art, is the most popular work of art in the museum.

With the museum's attendance figures growing as much as ten to 20 per cent annually, it is impossible to imagine the Museum Island today without the Museum für Islamische Kunst. That was not always the case. The history of the museum's founding is closely linked to the creation of the Museum Island and the 20th-century transformation of the great narratives of art and cultural history and the categories for organising museums. As late as the 19th century, the classical canon of advanced





Pergamonmuseum, Museum für Islamische Kunst, façade of the Caliph's Palace in Mshatta, 743/44, near Amman, Jordan, limestone, 5.07 × 33 m

cultures in museums included only the civilisations of the ancient Mediterranean, while the non-European traditions of the arts and culture were categorised as “ethnology” and hence, from the perspective of the time, dismissed as less valuable. That changed with lasting effect when the Museum Island was expanded under the direction of Wilhelm von Bode and with the building blocks of the history of the arts and culture in its museums, which are still highly topical from our present perspective. With the opening of the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum (now the Bode-Museum) in 1904, Bode established the *Abteilung für ältere islamische Kunst* (Department for Older Islamic Art). Previously, he had already considerably expanded the traditional canon by adding the *Frühchristlich-Byzantinische Sammlung* (Early Christian and Byzantine Collection) and the *Vorderasiatische Abteilung* (Near Eastern Department) in 1899 and would do so again with the *Ostasiatische Abteilung* (East Asian Department) in 1907. The basic understanding of global cultural history was thus reflected institutionally in the museum landscape for the first time.

Alongside this broadening of the museum's perspective on the world, the founding of the *Abteilung für ältere islamische Kunst* brought to bear another important principle that remains fundamental even today. The global history of art and culture is not simply the lining up of hermetically sealed cultural blocks but, in the spirit of

modern historiography, a processual sequence of historical connections, of developments with common causes, constant mutual influences, and even conscious demarcations. One milestone in the discussion of the meshing of cultural realms was the scholarly classification of the Mshatta Façade.

When the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II donated the monumental façade of the Mshatta Palace in 1903, one of the key works of Islamic art came to Berlin and evolved into the crystallisation point of scholarly study of the material culture of the Islamic world. Its spectacular ornament, with its Coptic, Syrian, and East Anatolian forms, reveals regionally distinct decorative elements from the eastern Mediterranean of Byzantine provenance (395–1453) as the legacy of the Roman Empire, but also numerous citations of the artistic vocabulary of the Mesopotamian and Iranian realms of the Sassanid Dynasty (224–642) in the tradition of ancient Persian kingdoms. Consequently, there were initially different proposals for classifying this undated work, with Byzantium and ancient Iran regarded as possible cornerstones. Without committing to a definitive dating, in 1904, Wilhelm von Bode used his new stately piece as the façade of the entrance to the new Islamic department and regarded it as a “link between Oriental and Byzantine art and above all as the point of departure for Islamic art”.¹ Only gradually, and in close connection with the development of Islamic art and archaeology as independent lines of study, did the thesis of its early Islamic origin gain acceptance. Today, Umayyad Caliph Al-Walid II (ruled 743–44) is generally agreed to have commissioned it.

The chief protagonists at the time – the museum’s first director, Friedrich Sarre, and the archaeologist Ernst Herzfeld – were working intensely on the early period of Islamic art, precisely because of the Mshatta Façade, and decided to arrange an extensive excavation of a city, the first to focus on an Islamic context. They chose the city of Samarra, which from 838 to 883 had been the residence of the caliphs of the world empire of the Abbasids and is now regarded as one of the largest fields of archaeological ruins in the world. The museum’s excavation between 1911 and 1913 can be considered the birth of Islamic archaeology. Supported by the Ottoman authorities, the finds were divided and a significant collection came to Germany. Enriched and supplemented by various other excavations (including two in the Sassanid capital of Ctesiphon, Iraq, in 1928/29 and 1931/32 and one at the Umayyad palace Khirbat al-Minya in Israel from 1937 to 1939), Berlin became the home of the world’s finest collection of early Islamic art and archaeology.

While archaeologists excavated the connections in cultural history and found important evidence in the form of material culture, most of the works of the applied arts and the classic Islamic art forms can be traced back to the connoisseurship of influential collectors. In addition to Bode’s own passion for collection, which led to a donation to the museum of his 21 important carpets from Persia and Asia Minor, it was above all the outstanding private collection of Friedrich Sarre, whom Bode appointed as director, that filled the museum spaces with impressive works of art. Generous support in the first decades of the 20th century made it possible to acquire other works on the art market, which with donations from several collectors have made the museum one of the most important collections of its kind. Some of its unique stars include an early Islamic aquamanile (Fig. 329), Fatimid ivory reliefs,

a washbasin and a water jug with inlay work from Mosul, and a polo player's flask (Fig. 328), to name but a few.

The collection's move to the Pergamonmuseum was once again triggered by the Mshatta Façade. Previously, in the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum, it had been forced into a space that was much too small for it – an unsatisfactory presentation for what was the only exhibited large piece of architecture on the Museum Island between 1908 and 1929. The Prussian Minister of Culture, Carl Heinrich Becker, himself an Orientalist, impassionedly called for understanding antiquity as a frame of reference for Islam and, consequently, for the transfer of the Islamic collection to the new museum building along with the monumental architecture of the classical Middle East. This was intended to express in terms of museum organisation the fact that Islamic art and culture are based directly, in terms of geography and cultural history, on ancient Mediterranean and Oriental cultures and therefore relate to the corresponding collections in the Pergamonmuseum. This is particularly true of the early Islamic period, which forms the focus of the Berlin collection. Hence the construction supervisory board decided on 26 August 1927 to house the Islamic department in the south wing of the new building. Cultural history was not just the foundation for this institutional arrangement; it also became the system for organising the new path through the museum. For the first time, a museum for Islamic art was clearly structured chronologically and geographically. Although here, too, the placement of the Mshatta Façade remained a painful compromise, albeit an improvement, the remainder of the collection could now spread out in generous spaces appropriate to their period. Just seven years later, however, it was closed. The innovative and dynamic new era of the early 20th century was followed by dramatic events, and the Museum für Islamische Kunst shared the fate of many of Berlin's other museums: war, the expulsion of Jewish curators and collectors, destruction, deportation, division, restoration, and rebuilding in East and West. Here, too, heroic things were achieved after the war. But it was only with the reunification of Germany that a new chapter could be opened.

By opening a new permanent exhibition of the holdings from both East and West in 2001, the Museum für Islamische Kunst celebrated reunification, and marked a century of its existence with a large party in 2004. With the move of the collection's holdings that had remained behind in Dahlem to the Museum Island in 2009 and the transfer of the restoration workshops to the Archäologisches Zentrum (Archaeological Centre) in 2012, all the museum facilities will be together again – offering the best conditions for the classical tasks of preserving and research. With a specialised library that is unique in Europe and numerous research projects in the Islamic world, the museum is now an internationally active research institution with a long tradition. The most recent highlights include collaboration with the Auswärtiges Amt (Foreign Office) and the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut (German Archaeological Institute) to rebuild the Herat National Museum and the partial reconstruction of the ruins of Mshatta Palace in cooperation with the Technische Universität Berlin – the expression of a common responsibility to a shared cultural heritage.

Another new task in the sphere of education and migration results from the museum's feature as the unique storehouse for the culture of Muslim societies in Germany. The Berlin collection can add a perspective based on cultural history to current



debates on Islam and thus contribute an objectivity and cultural depth that is largely lacking in the current culturalist and ahistorical public discourse – a task that will no doubt become even more important over the next few years.

It is therefore all the more encouraging that the current reconception as part of its move into the north wing of the Pergamonmuseum by 2019 provides an opportunity to orient and present ourselves anew. With nearly three times as much floor space on the four levels of the Pergamonmuseum, it will become possible to take up the approaches of the 20th century and either extend them logically or adapt them to current needs. The crucial thing will be to present the elaborate arrangement according to cultural history and geography in a system that is as simple as possible without sacrificing the inherent complexity of our collection. Studying visitors has shown that the many dynasties unfamiliar to non-specialists are scarcely adequate as a principle for organising the path through the collection. Our goal is to communicate connections in a metastructure that can be quickly grasped. For that reason, a new system is being developed. To make Islamic art and archaeology more accessible for visitors, a simplified chronological order according to eras, geographical localisation, categorisation by spheres of life, and thematic focuses will structure the path through the museum. The division into three eras – Late Antiquity, Middle Period, and Modern Era – and the planned intense geographical verification will help visitors not to regard the “art histories” of Muslim societies as a linear, self-contained system but to consider instead the connections to pre-Islamic and non-Islamic societies that were typical of the specific eras. No matter whether it is the reception of the legacy of antiquity, especially in the 8th and 9th centuries, or the connections to China in the

Pergamonmuseum, Museum für Islamische Kunst,
 Damascus niche from a Samaritan house,
 15th–16th century, Damascus, Syria, marble,
 coloured stones, partially painted, 302 × 245 cm

9th century and again from the 13th century onwards, or cultural exchange in the Mediterranean, especially in the 11th, 13th, and 16th centuries, or the articulation of local forms of a global modern era in the 19th century: all are fundamental for an understanding of the patterns and categories of Islamic art.

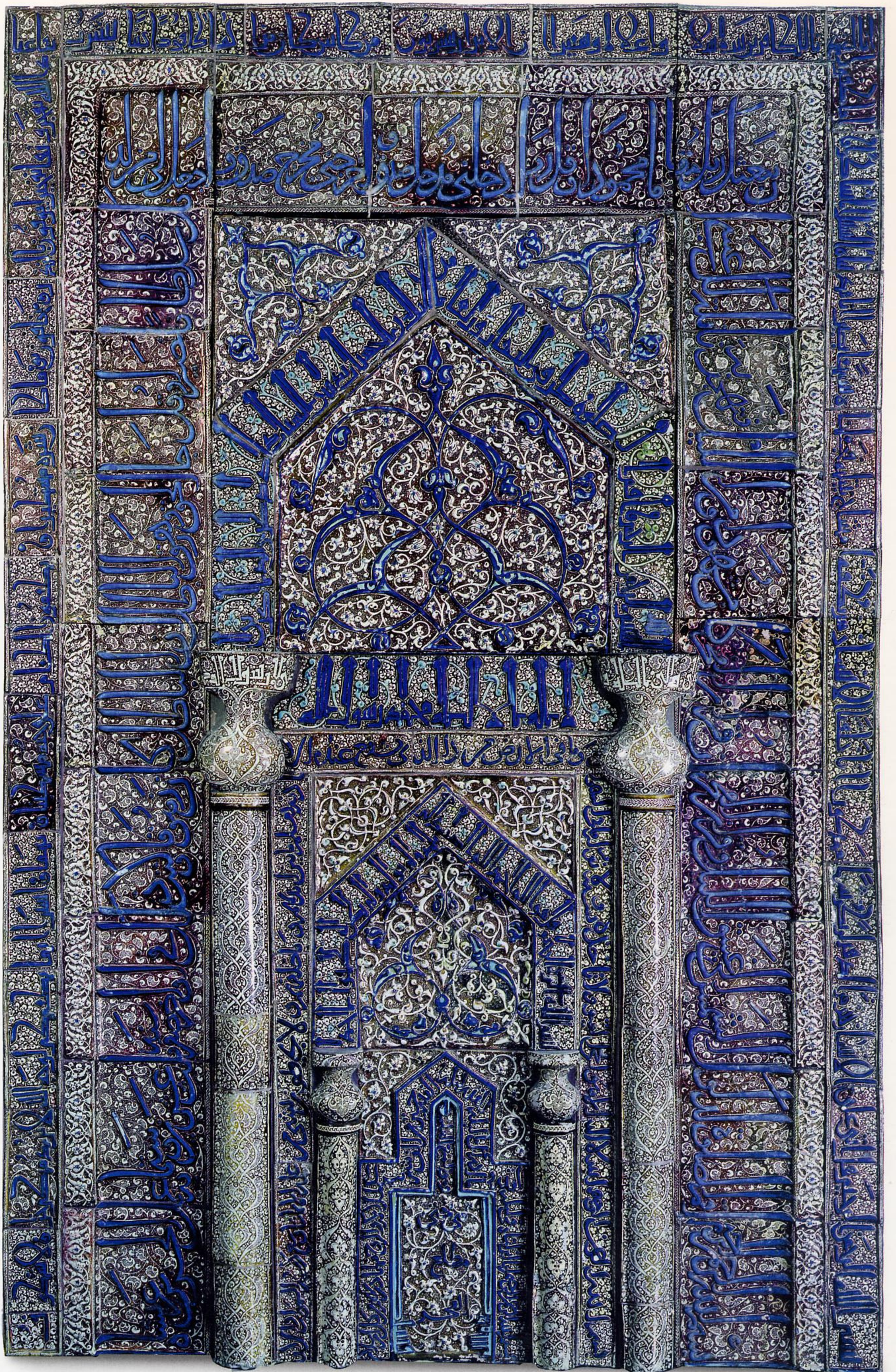
This narrative of consecutiveness will also determine the future main path through the museum. The Pergamonmuseum will now have a fifth architecture hall, in the north wing, for the Mshatta Façade, which will fill a gap in the cultural panorama of the main path. If we consider the history of the Museum Island, it is clear that German reunification has provided visitors to the Pergamonmuseum with a unique opportunity to perceive all of its large-scale architectural works as equally worthy building blocks in the history of the art and culture of the eastern Mediterranean and the Near East. The new main path through the Pergamonmuseum is not just an intelligent way of guiding visitors – one of the core tasks of the museum as well as the historical purpose of the main path – but also offers a unique overview of the pre-modern Near East, which previously lacked only Egypt, Late Antiquity, and early Islam. While a fourth wing is being built for the large-scale architectural works of Egypt, our plan is to work together with the adjacent Museum für Byzantinische Kunst (Museum of Byzantine Art) and contribute our unique collection of Sassanid and post-Sassanid objects to close the last gaps in this main tour, which is unique in the world.

This will also bring to a close a long history for the main work in our museum. The relocation of the monumental Mshatta Façade in the north wing is intended to follow the same principles that were applied when installing the Ishtar Gate, the Pergamon Altar, and the Market Gate of Miletus, which helped the Pergamonmuseum achieve a world reputation as a unique architectural museum: its monumental axiality will be reconstructed in its original size, 47 metres long, with a gate 3.46 metres across. The relatively few elements that are missing will be reconstructed, as was done with the museum's other large-scale architectural works. This will make it possible to take the blocks that had not previously been incorporated and place them in their original position in the island's most completely intact monument. In keeping with the tradition of the Pergamonmuseum's spatial appearance, architectural presentation, and historical narrative of culture, the potential of one of the oldest and historically most significant large-scale pieces of architecture will finally be adequately realised, thus effectively introducing its voice into the unique museum concert of the advanced cultures of the Near East.

¹ Wilhelm Bode, "Die neuen Erwerbungen im Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum", *Vossische Zeitung*, 23 November 1904.



Single sheet with delicate calligraphy and marginal illustrations, from the poetry anthology *Golestan* (Rose Garden) by the Persian poet Sa'di, c. 1525/30, Herat, Afghanistan (?), 29.4 × 19.2 cm





Garden carpet, late 18th century,
 north-western Iran, wool, 879 × 291 cm

LEFT PAGE

Prayer niche (mihrab) from the
 Meydan Mosque, 1226, Kashan, Iran,
 gold lustre ceramic, 395 × 280 cm





Polo player's flask, c. 1300, probably from a workshop in Damascus or Cairo for export to Yemen, honey-coloured, ribbed glass with enamel and gold painting, 28 × 19 cm

LEFT PAGE

Vessel (aquamanile) in the shape of a bird, 8th century, Iran, bronze, 34 × 35 cm