



THE ISLAMIC COLLECTION OF THE NÁPRSTEK MUSEUM

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The largest and most important collection of Islamic art and crafts in Bohemia is kept by the Náprstek Museum. The earliest acquisitions of its Islamic collection reached the museum shortly after its foundation, in the form of occasional gifts. The list of donors, which is part of the museum's historical inventory, includes the names of the institution's founder **Vojtěch Náprstek (1826 - 1894)** and his wife, **Josefa Náprstková (1838 - 1907)**, as well as a number of other individuals. Some of them, such as the artist **Antonín Chittussi (1847 - 1891)**, were prominent representatives of the public and cultural life of the past century. Those gifts were mostly coincidental, consisting of individual items: carpets, samples of textiles, clothes and accessories. The first larger-scale collection was donated to the museum by **Adolf Kašpar**, a bandleader who had spent some time in Crimea and Central Asia. His collection contains chiefly clothes and jewels worn by women members of the Tatar tribes, as well as Persian textiles and carpets.

The museum's collection was further enlarged thanks to contributions from the period's leading explorers. Thus **Josef Wünsch (1842 - 1907)** enriched them notably with an assortment of weapons from Armenia and Kurdistan. Although explorer **Josef Kořenský (1847 - 1938)** concentrated his interest mostly on expeditions to the Far East, he also presented to the museum a gift of Turkish ceramics from Kütahya, and Turkish textiles. An important asset was added to the collections in the form of a gift from the poet **Julius Zeyer (1841 - 1901)**, who brought

from his travels in Tunisia and Turkey, and from his stay in Russia, where he had visited among other places the Crimea and Caucasus, a fine collection of contemporary textiles, metal and wooden objects, and weapons. A friend of the Náprsteks, he bequeathed his collection to the museum. In token of her respect for Zeyer, Josefa Náprstková had two of the museum's rooms styled as a faithful copy of Zeyer's home, to serve as the poet's memorial.

The crucial part of its Islamic collection was acquired by the Náprstek Museum only after World War II, in the form of various gifts and purchases. Notwithstanding the rather unsystematic way in which the collection was built, it gradually evolved into a body divided into several compact sections representing the key periods of Islamic culture.

In 1994 the museum's corpus was supplemented by a unique collection of Anatolian carpets gathered by a private Czech-born collector resident in Munich, **Rainer Kreissl (b. 1924)**. He had dedicated a lifelong endeavour to the building of this body of carpets whose import is worldwide and which is the largest of its kind in Central Europe. As R. Kreissl noted in his letter of presentation, he donated it to humanity as a whole, to be kept in the care of the Czech people. The Náprstek Museum was picked as the specialized centre in charge of the practical aspects of such care.

A significant part of the Islamic collection is formed by metal objects. There, the most substantial category consists of items destined for everyday use, such as ewers, bowls, trays and plates. A smaller portion of these objects comes from the Arab countries and Turkey, the collection's main focus being on Iran and Central Asia, in terms of chronology ranging predominantly from the mid-19th through the early 20th centuries. The various metal objects exemplify the techniques of casting or beating, as well as the decorative methods of engraving, stamping, piercing, embossing, beating, or plating brass, steel, copper and other materials with gold, silver or copper, etc. Standard Iranian production dating from the mid- through late 19th century is documented by an assortment of scissors and other implements made of pierced steel, as well as by a number of variously shaped brass incense burners and mosque lamps, likewise decorated with piercing or engraving. The collection also gradually acquired a representative body of metalwares coming chiefly from the region of Bukhara and Samarkand, dating from between the 17th and 19th centuries. While the core of the collection consists of recent items, it does also contain rare early objects, such as a set of incense burners with cast-brass legs, fea-

turing simple engraved and stamped decoration, dating from the 12th century; or brass water bowls decorated with engraved quotations from the Koran and magic figures meant to protect the owner from disease and misfortune, dating from the 16th - 18th centuries. An example of exquisite craftsmanship and sophisticated aesthetic feeling is provided by a small

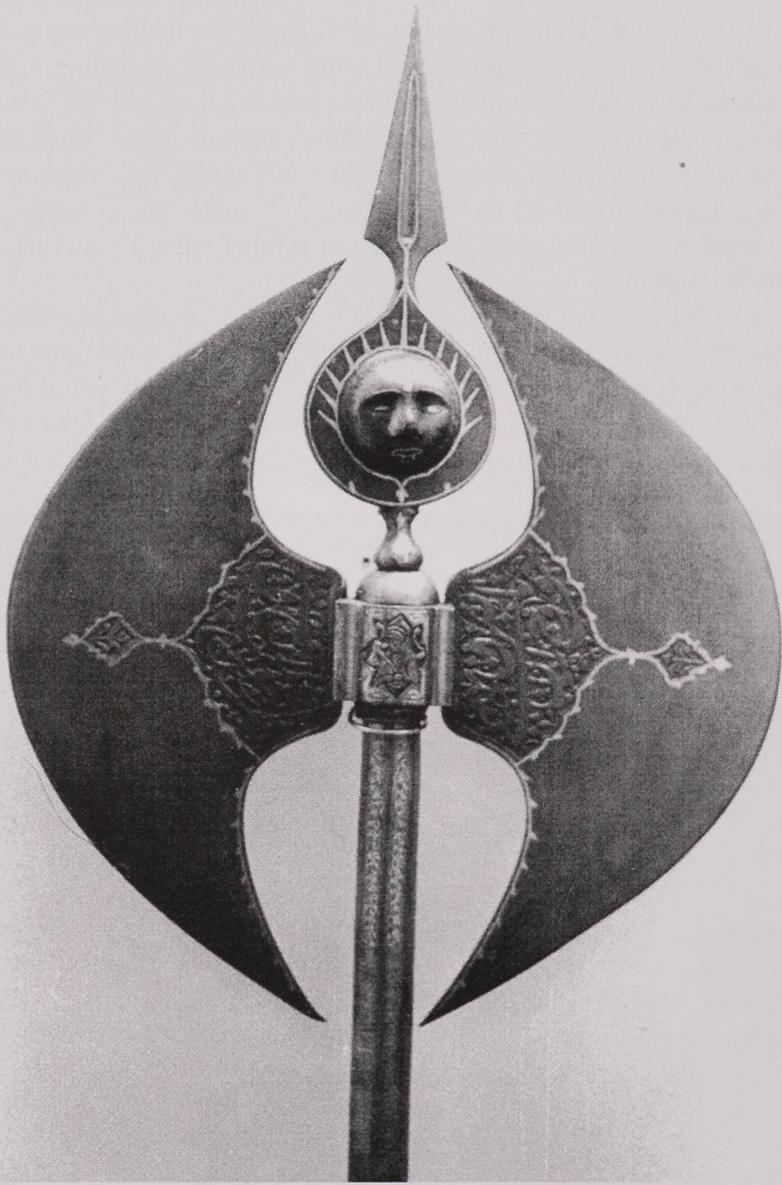


Jug with elaborate vegetal pattern, twelve signs of the Zodiac and seven planets. Bronze inlaid with silver and gold, Thuluth and Kufic calligraphy. Iraq (Mosul), around mid 13th century. H. 14 cm, max. diameter 12 cm (NpM 46 443).

jug made of bronze, inlaid with silver and gold, depicting the signs of the Zodiac and personified planets. On a par with the finest specimens in the world's major collections, the jug was made in Mosul, present-day Iraq, in the mid-13th century. Syrian tray stands dating from the 13th - 14th centuries, styled in an hour-glass shape, are made of brass sheet decorated with engraved and inlaid calligraphic inscriptions and vegetal motives, including most notably lotus flowers.

An important section of the Islamic collection is formed by weapons, including both cold- and firearms. Most of them date from the 19th century, earlier specimens being less numerous. The firearms include rifles and pistols coming chiefly from Turkey, the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iran. The collection's body of cold arms documents the 19th-century Islamic production on a broader scale, in terms of both typology and geographic variety. It features diverse types of daggers and knives (*jambiya*, *hand-jar*, *peshkabz*, *kinjal*), sabres (*shamshir*, *kilij*, *yatagan*), and swords, covering virtually all of the Near East, Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Balkans. The collection also includes various parts of armour designed to protect the forearm and chest, helmets, shields and gunpowder boxes, as well as further types of weapons, such as maces, spears and battle-axes. The making of these weapons involves various methods of processing metals, most notably steel and iron, the most frequent of which include inlaying with differently coloured metals, often precious ones, such as gold and silver. Those parts of the weapons which are not made of metal - butts, hilts, sheaths, etc. - provide ground for further decorative techniques: in the case of wood, veneering with mother-of-pearl and natural or coloured bone; beating in brass or silver threads; and inlaying with various semiprecious stones, including notably turquoises and sea corals. Gradually, the collection's body of weapons has split into two major groups. The first comprises Persian weapons, ranging from swords, sabres, maces and daggers, to a complete 18th - 19th-century Persian soldier's coat of armour (consisting of a helmet, shield, chain mail breast and leg armour, forearm protection and breast-plate). The second, Turkish, group features primarily various types of *yatagans*, sabres, rifles, quivers with arrows, and shields woven from natural fibres.

Jewels take up a comparatively small portion of the collection. However, the variety of their types amply documents the art of jewellery in various parts of the Islamic world. The collection contains earrings, bracelets, rings and signet-rings, as well as necklaces, pendants, various ornaments to decorate the head, arms and clothes, and belt buckles. These



Double-bladed axe with relief sun at the centre. Engraved steel inlaid with gold, Nasta'liq calligraphy. Iran, 19th century. 99 x 23 cm (NpM 4 073).

objects are made of metals, both precious and non-precious, tin-plated copper, brass and silver, and less frequently, gold. The making and decoration of jewels involves a number of other materials, including e.g. sea corals, amber, turquoise, mother-of-pearl, pearls, rubies and opals. Jewel-making techniques vary, ranging from filigree, granulation and enamelling, to metal inlaying. One of the Islamic collection's highlights is a fragment of a Turkish jade brooch dating from the late 15th - early 16th centuries. It is decorated with rubies set at the centre of a relief pattern featuring gold rosettes on stems.

The collection of Islamic ceramics is not large in purely quantitative terms. Besides vessels dating from the early 20th century and more recent specimens, coming from Turkey, the Dardanelles, Iran and Central Asia, it contains some earlier and more valuable items: 14th-century faience tiles with lustre painting and a relief inscribed quotation from the Koran, com-



Miniature in the shape of heart with hunting motives. Painted on mother-of-pearl under transparent lacquer. Iran, 19th - 20th centuries. 13 x 12 cm (NpM A 11 416).



Bracelet. Silver and brass, filigree, opals. Central Asia, the Turkmens, 19th – 20th centuries. H. 8.5 cm, max. diameter 7.8 cm (NpM 57 357).

ing from Kashan (Iran); a 17th - 18th-century set of earthenware vessels with blue-and-white painting under glaze, from Iran; and several 18th - 19th-century plates exemplifying Iznik production (Turkey). The collection also includes a set of 19th-century earthenware relief tiles with motives from the Iranian mythology and history, painted under glaze in the Qajar style.

A specific group of objects is represented by Persian lacquerware from the Qajar period (18th - 19th c.). These include most notably book covers and cases for writing materials (reed pens and ink), which are usually made of paper pulp or wood, and are decorated with gouache painting under transparent lacquer. The painting, featuring both figural and vegetable motives, was inspired by the classical Iranian miniatures, and at



Tile, falconer on a horse. Earthenware, molded and painted underglaze. Iran, 19th century. 16 x 11 cm (NpM 18 022).

later periods imitated European painting, including realistically conceived medallion portraiture. Lacquer was likewise used in decorating various metallic and wooden boxes, bowls, plates, or pictures painted on a ground of paper pulp or moulded and layered leather.

The collection of Islamic art of the book and painting is smaller, compared with the rest of the Islamic corpus. It consists of manuscripts, separate sheets from MS which may be illustrated, prints, and miniatures. A

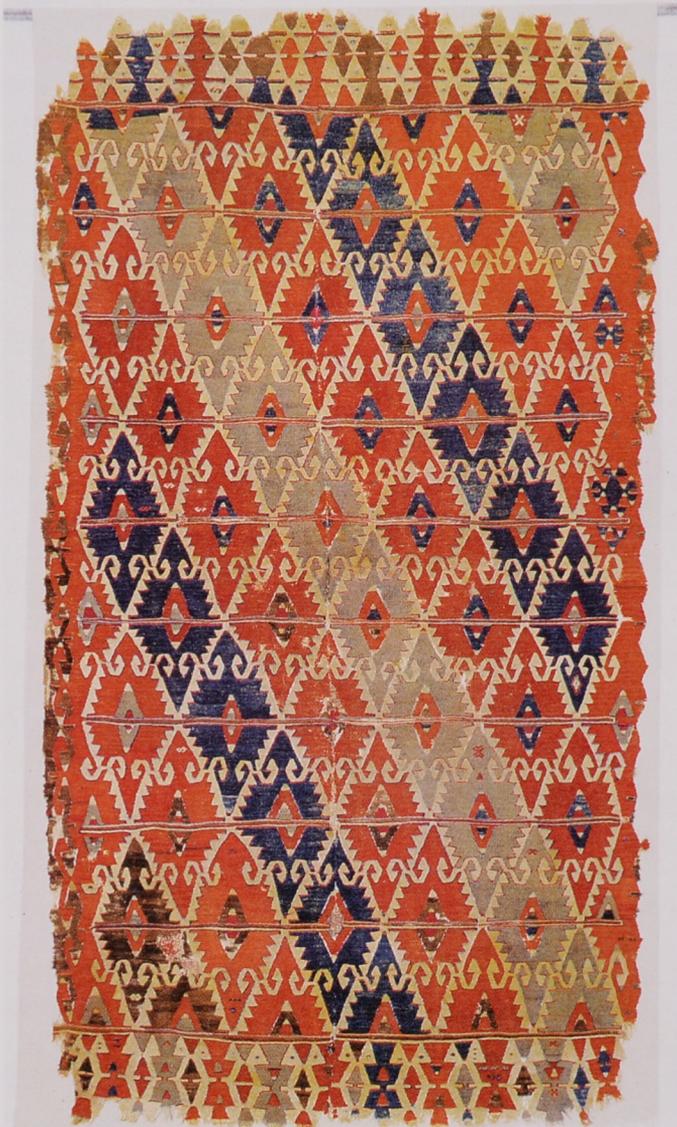
predominant part of the written materials and miniatures date from the late 19th and early 20th centuries and come mostly from Iran. A smaller number of items come from other Islamic countries. The miniatures in the Náprstek Museum's collection are exclusively of Iranian provenance, depicting themes based on classical Persian literature, as well as scenes from everyday secular life. The collection's less standard specimens of Persian painting include a series of Qajar pictures dating from the 19th century, employing the medium of oil on canvas and depicting figural scenes from court life and themes from classical Persian literature.

Traditional Islamic crafts include woodwork. The museum's collection contains various wooden objects, mostly intended for practical use, decorated by inlaying. The technique involves the use of rare species of wood, bone and mother-of-pearl. It is exemplified most frequently by the omnipresent Islamic bookstands, water pipes, and jewel boxes. A substantial part of the collection is represented by furniture, including primarily various types of large and small tables, chairs, divans, armchairs and paravans, coming chiefly from Syria, Egypt and Turkey, dating from the late 19th century. An elaborate decorative technique typical for Iran, known as *khatamkari*, involves a mosaic assembled from natural and coloured bone, wood and thin threads of metal. It is represented in the collection by a small array of utility items comprised of diverse cases, holders and boxes, as well as several larger items, e.g. armchairs and picture frames.

The Islamic textile production, which enjoys worldwide fame, is represented in the Náprstek Museum's collection by a wide scale of specimens. The most important of them are carpets, both pile and woven with the use of the gobelin technique, either all-wool, or with cotton warp or silk pile. Some of them were made for domestic use, while others, in more recent periods, were manufactured for export, particularly for the European market. The museum's original collection, rather modest in size, documents the 19th - 20th-century carpet production of several Islamic regions: namely, Turkey, Iran and Central Asia. Apart from the two aforementioned types of carpets, it contains a wide variety of accessories essential to the nomadic lifestyle, such as tent strips, hangings, bags, covers for mounts, and paired bags suspended from the saddle. Interesting from that point of view are knotted carpets, kelims and tent strips from Turkmenia and the Caucasus, dating from the 19th century: they exemplify the original colours and patterns that have characterized the local tribal cultures for centuries.



Pile prayer carpet with stylized prayer "portable" (*mihrab*). All-wool. Turkey, Western Anatolia, Salihli, around 1700. Gift of Rainer Kreissl, Munich. 157 x 99 cm (NpM A 24 196).



Kilim with *elibelinde* motif (a woman figure with arms on her hips). All-wool. Turkey, Western Anatolia, first half of the 19th century. Gift of Rainer Kreissl, Munich. 320 × 177 (NpM A 24 593).

Today this collection forms only a minute fraction of the exceptionally extensive body of carpets which originated thanks to the gift of Rainer Kreissl mentioned above. His collection is quite unique, not just in terms of size, but also as regards importance. It is a thoroughly comprehensive corpus documenting both ethnographically and artistically the historical evolution of Turkish carpet making from the 13th through the early 20th centuries. Represented in it are all the basic types of carpets, as divided according to method of making, standard of production and use of material, as well as according to purpose and provenance. In addition to standard types, it contains special ones, such as praying carpets, or carpets and cushions intended for sitting (*yastik*) or sleeping (*yatak*). Anatolian carpets are also exceptional in their specific stylization of geometric or vegetable motives, which sets them quite apart from the rest of the carpet production. The origins of some of their patterns date back to antiquity, assigning them a special status as irreplaceable evidence of the cultural continuity of that part of the world. One of the collection's most valuable specimens is an all-wool carpet from Eastern Anatolia, dating from the 13th - 14th centuries, whose pattern of mosaic tiles reflects the region's traditional links with antiquity.

Apart from carpets, the Náprstek Museum's Islamic collection contains various types of textiles, such as covers, draperies, tablecloths and miscellaneous local costumes and clothing accessories from different Islamic countries. Their making and decoration involves a number of more or less familiar techniques applied to various kinds of fabrics (silk, cotton, taffeta, cambric, brocade, muslin), and a rich palette of decorative methods. The latter include embroidering with cotton, woollen and silk yarn or with gold and silver tinsel, printing on fabrics, or applying fabric on another fabric. The collection features knitted clothing articles and samples of crochet (lace, etc.), dating from the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

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