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# Italy ix. PERSIAN ART COLLECTIONS



## ITALY

### ix. PERSIAN ART COLLECTIONS

Since the Middle Ages, Italians have been some of the greatest collectors of Islamic art in Europe. The Islamic market that Italy drew on was very large and some of the most opulent works were imported from Persia. Among the five most stunning are the early 14th century Central Asian textiles (lampas weave, silk, gold thread) used to make the burial cloths of Cangrande I della Scala (d. 22 July 1329), held by the Museo di Castelvecchio in Verona since 1922 (similar ones used for the dalmatic robe of Pope Benedict XI are preserved in the Church of San Domenico in Perugia; Magagnato; Wardwell). Dating from the late 8th or early 9th century is a large piece of red silk with *senmurv* designs used in the Carolingian period to make a whole chasuble housed in the Abbey of San Salvatore near Siena. This textile was venerated as a relic of Pope St. Mark (first half of the 4th century; but to be dated, in all probability, to Pope John VIII (872-82; Dolcini). Until World War II, the façade of the Church of San Frediano (first half of the 12th century) in Lucca was surmounted by an engraved, cast bronze incense burner from the 9th century in the shape of a bird, fitted with a whistle that when the *libeccio* (south-west wind) blew emitted a very shrill sound (Treasury of San Frediano, Lucca; Scerrato, 1979, p. 491).

A bowl in relief-cut glass of an opaque turquoise color, perhaps previously in the possession of the Byzantines, appears to have been offered as a gift to the Signoria of Venice by Uzun Hasan (1453-78), leader of the Āq-Qoyunlū (q.v.), and has the word *Khorāsān* carved in relief underneath its base. It is a magnificent 10th century specimen, created in imitation of a carved turquoise bowl now in the Treasury of St. Mark in Venice (Inv. no. 140; Erdmann, pp. 103-4). The Treasury of St. Mark also holds a carved rock crystal dish (Inv. no. 102; Iran or Iraq, 9th-10th century), which is probably the one described in the inventory of 1325, as "*Platinam unam de cristallo intaiatam*" (Alcouffe, pp. 222-23; cf. also Erdmann, pp. 115-17).

One of the earliest, and most famous families to collect Islamic art was undoubtedly the Medici, in Florence who, from the 15th century onwards, collected Islamic metalwork. The collection was lost in 1494-95 when the Medici were driven out of Florence; nevertheless, when they re-entered the city in the following century, a limited number of the pieces were retrieved. A cast brass jug engraved and inlaid with gold and silver, produced in the late 15th-early 16th century, was acquired by Ferdinand I de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany (1587-1609) in 1589, and has been kept in the Sala della Tribuna at the Uffizi Palace (Florence Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Inv. Bronzi 289); Curatola and Spallanzani, 1981b, pp. 13-16). The most recent inventory, in which its lid and its handle with a zoomorphic head (both later lost) are still recorded, is that of 1733. The jug is part of a remarkable group of Timurid pieces characterized by the same sub-spherical shape and elaborately decorated with arabesques (Komaroff, pp. 153-62, 169-83, 219-21). The same museum houses a hammered brass bowl, engraved and inlaid in silver and gold,

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depicting a series of horsemen and dated to the 14th century ([PLATE I](#) and [PLATE II](#); Inv. Bronzi, 7161; Curatola, ed., 1993, pp. 265-66, cat. 152); an inscription on the base possibly refers to a Safavid collector of objects from Fārs (Melikian-Chirvani, pp. 77-78).

The Medici of Florence also collected precious objects such as vessels in crystal and in semiprecious stones; these include an outstanding sardonyx jug with a handle in the shape of a panther (Persia, 8th century), listed in an inventory compiled in the 15th century upon the death of Lorenzo the Magnificent (1492) and copied in 1512: *Uno bochale di sardonio chol manicho di detta pietra, col piè et bechuccio d'ariento dorato, pesa lib. xi once 3, vale f. 2000* 'A jug in sardonyx with a handle in the said stone, with foot and spout in gilded silver, weight 11 pounds, 3 ounces, value fl. 2000' (Spallanzani and Gaeta Bertelà, p. 34), at present in the Museo degli Argenti in Florence (Inv. Gemme 777; Damiani and Scalini, eds, p. 79, cat. 51) and a jade bowl (probably from Central Asia, 15th century) also from the collection of Lorenzo the Magnificent (Grote, p. 127). The latter was perhaps transferred from the Treasure of S. Lorenzo or from the Uffizi to the Museo di Fisica e Storia Naturale in the 18th century and, at the end of the 19th century, to the Museo di Mineralogia e Litologia of the University of Florence (Inv. no. 1947, 1336/565; Curatola, ed., 1993, pp. 360-61, cat. 217). A small engraved serpentine bowl with a handle in the shape of a dragon was, in all probability, one of the gifts presented by Johan Georg I, the Elector of Saxony, to the Grand Duke Ferdinand II of Tuscany in 1654; it is perhaps the same bowl listed in a Medici inventory of 1666-70 (Florence, Museo degli Argenti, Inv. Gemme 745; Curatola, ed., 1993, pp. 359-60, cat. 216).

A beautiful ewer in hammered and embossed brass, engraved and inlaid in copper and silver (Khorasan, late 12th to early 13th century), comes from the ancient collection of the Este (from 1288 Lords, and from 1452 Dukes of Modena, until 1796); it is presently in the Galleria Estense in Modena (Inv. no. 6921; Curatola, ed., 1993, pp. 234-37, cat. 125). The ewer, one of a fairly large extant group, has alternately fluted and concave faces, a pierced lid surmounted by a projecting feline, and many other ornaments (including harpies and falcons) projecting out from the body; some inscriptions in animated *naskī* on the body and in animated kufic on the foot. The inscriptions wish upon the owner glory, good fortune, and the like. The Galleria Estense holds another important example of Persian metalwork (Inv. no. 8082): an engraved cast brass bowl inlaid in gold and silver, inscribed "work of 'Abd-al-Qāder al-Ḳāleq Širāzī" and dated Moḥarram 705/August 1305. On the body, epigraphical cartouches (*naskī*) alternate with medallions showing fighting, hunting, and court scenes (Curatola, ed., 1993, pp. 266-67, cat. 153).

Cardinal Cesare Borgia (1731-1804), Prefect of Propaganda Fide, collected enough antiquities and curios from all over the world to fill a museum in Velletri (Rome); the objects in the Islamic collection included an outstanding engraved cast bronze bowl inlaid in silver, with an animated *naskī* inscription around the rim; we read on the body the name of its owner, Ḳalif b. al-Julāki (Khorasan, late 12th to early 13th century; now in the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples, Inv. A.M. 112114; Scerrato, 1968, pp. 2-3). A later (13th to 14th century) bowl of similar shape, with a kufic inscription running around the rim, from the Carrand collection, is in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello in Florence (Inv. C 363; Damiani and Scalini, eds, p. 126, cat. 100). Some objects from collections of Islamic antiquities belonging to important Italian families are now housed in various museums abroad. Noteworthy is the so-called "Vaso Vescovali" from the Vescovali collection (see M. Lanci, *Trattato*), bought on the antiques market in 1950 by the British Museum. It is an important cast bronze bowl with lid (probably not originally part of the object), inlaid in silver, with complex astrological ornamentation (Khorasan, late 12th to early 13th century; London, The British Museum, Inv. OA 1950-7-2511; Curatola, ed., 1993, pp. 237-39, cat. 127).

There is also a collection of Islamic metalwork in the Museo Civico Medievale in Bologna, which includes a superb engraved, cast bronze bowl inlaid with silver (Inv.

no. 2128), inscribed on the inside in animated kufic and on the outside in *naskī*, executed for a member of the retinue of Badr-al-Din Lo'lo', *atābeg* of Mosul (1222-59), probably from northwestern Persia and dated to the first half of the 13th century (Scerrato, 1979, p. 508).

Hunting scenes are depicted both on the outside, in medallions and on the inside, on the base. Some of the above-mentioned museums also house Persian objects in other materials, mainly ceramics, in their collections of Islamic art. Excellent examples of painted luster tiles (12th-14th century) are to be found, for instance, in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello in Florence (Curatola and Spallanzani, 1981a, pp. 6-17), and the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples (Scerrato, 1968, pp. 42-46, cat. 50-59), and also in the Scuola Grande di S. Rocco in Venice, the Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche in Faenza and the Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale in Rome. In addition to cross, star, and quadrangular-shaped tiles with figures, there are many with verses from the *Šāh-nāma* by Ferdowsi. In Naples, there is a good collection of Safavid and Qajar tiles, not only in the Museo di Capodimonte, but also in the Museo Artistico Industriale, a 19th century establishment with a triple function (museum, school, and workshop where replicas of Islamic prototypes were made; Fontana, 1988, p. 12). Apropos of ceramics, it should be noted that the aforementioned museums in Faenza and Rome also hold large and important collections of Samanid, Seljuq, Il-khanid, Timurid, and Safavid vessels (Torre, ed., pp. 41-115; Curatola, ed., 1993, pp. 93-94, 222-34, 255-56, 263-64, 354, 424-26). Among the finest works in the Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale in Rome (established in 1957), is a large Samanid bowl of so-called buff animated ware on which three horsemen hunting with a cheetah are depicted (Inv. no. 2629), some Seljuq turquoise glazed house-models (Inv. nos. 1417), a beautiful turquoise-glazed, molded ewer with a series of interlaced dancers (Inv. no. 4863; Ventrone), some luster and *minā' i* pieces, and a magnificent *lājvardina* bottle (Inv. no. 1977). A good collection of Samanid, Seljuq, and Il-khanid ceramics, as yet unpublished, is housed in the Department of Asiatic Studies of the University of Naples "L'Orientale." The collection of the Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale in Rome also includes some of the oldest pieces produced in Persia, not only ceramics, but also other handicrafts: e.g., a turquoise-glazed ceramic storage jar with applied relief (Inv. no. 12749; Curatola, ed., 1993, p. 66, cat. 1), dated to the early Islamic period (late 7th-early 8th century), and a small bowl in greenish glass with applied or molded disks (Inv. no. 2705; Genito, p. 6) belonging to the same period. There are still some doubts, however, concerning the Persian or Byzantine origin of a group of glasses with wheel-cut disks in the Treasury of St. Mark in Venice (Grabar, pp. 70-71, 75-76, cat. 65, 78, 80-81). An engraved cast bronze jug (Khorasan or Transoxiana, 9th-10th century), with a stylized pomegranate serving as a thumb-rest (Rome, Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale, Inv. no. 877/695; Curatola, ed., 1993, pp. 97-98, cat. 25), belongs to a slightly later period, as does a cast bronze jug with an attached spout ending in the shape of a zoomorphic head, from the Church of San Lorenzo fuori le Mura (Rome), now in the Museo Sacro, Vatican City (Scerrato, 1979, p. 455). This museum also houses an important silk from eastern Persia (8th-9th century), displaying pairs of lions set face to face in oval medallions (Inv. no. 1251; Scerrato, 1979, p. 454).

Italian collections hold other textiles, some little known, including a beautiful silk from the Tomb of St. Cyriacus in Ancona, now in the local Museo Diocesano. The design, consisting of roundels containing pairs of lions set back to back, is most probably from Central Asia, mid-13th century (Curatola, ed., 1993, pp. 244-45, cat. 132). In the Museo Nazionale del Bargello in Florence there are two fragments of silks contemporary with the above, most probably from western Persia, dated to around 1340-80, both with a blue background, one with animal and vegetal designs (Inv. no. 2312 Carrand), the other with floral motifs (Inv. no. 609 Franchetti; for both see Suriano and Carboni, pp. 38-44, cat. 9-10). An earlier Central Asian silk (8th century), belonging to the so-called "Zandaniji" textiles, has oval medallions containing a pair of lions set face to face, alternating with trees of life and quadrupeds; it is also in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello in Florence (Inv. no. 633

Franchetti; Suriano and Carboni, pp. 18-21, cat. 2). Some Safavid textiles are to be found in the same museum, as well as in the Museo Correr in Venice, the Museo Civico in Turin, the Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale in Rome, and the Museo Poldi Pezzoli in Milan (PLATE III; Curatola, ed., 1993, pp. 428-33, cat. 274-76, 278; Suriano and Carboni, pp. 117-27, cat. 39-42). At the end of the 16th century, and particularly from the 17th century on, following the establishment of close diplomatic relations between Safavid Persia and major Italian cities, including Venice and Florence, many gifts were exchanged between Persia and Italy. In this manner, a number of Persian carpets found their way to both these cities.

From 1603 on, some carpets were presented by Shah Abbās I (1587-1629) to the Serenissima of Venice, and are housed in the Basilica of St. Mark (Erdmann, pp. 123-24); while five Safavid examples known as "Polonaise" carpets, produced mainly in Isfahan but also in Kāšān, are in the Treasury of St. Mark in Venice (Inv. nos 23-27; Erdmann, pp. 123-27, cat. 133-37). A pair of "Polonaise" carpets, formerly owned by the Italian Doria family, are in two major foreign museums: the Carpet Museum in Tehran (King), and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Inv. no. 50.190.5; Dimand and Mailey, pp. 60-61, 103, cat. 18). Three carpets, woven with silk and gold and silver threads, entered the Florentine Grand Ducal collections in the 18th century at the time of the Grand Dukes of Lorraine, and are now in the Museo degli Argenti in Florence (Boralevi, 1980). Florence also boasts important collections of Persian carpets assembled by antique dealers during the 19th and 20th century. The most notable was Stefano Bardini, who bequeathed to the city of Florence a museum that bears his name (Museo Bardini), whose holdings include twenty Persian carpets, some of exquisite craftsmanship (Boralevi, 1981). A carpet in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello in Florence (Inv. no. 2203 Carrand; Curatola and Spallanzani, 1983, pp. 20-21, 26) and others in the Museo Poldi Pezzoli in Milan (Balboni Brizza, pp. 40-59) are magnificent examples of 16th century workmanship. Those in Milan include a particularly outstanding carpet with hunting scenes from Isfahan, dating to 1521, or, more probably, 1541 (see above, PLATE III, Temporary Loan); abandoned by papal troops in the Quirinal Palace in 1870, it became part of the furnishings of the royal palace of Victor Emmanuel III in Monza, who donated it to the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan in 1919, which, in turn, lent it to the Museo Poldi Pezzoli in 1923); and another with medallions and dragons, probably made for Shah Ṭahmāsp, (Kāšān, 1524-76; Inv. No. 424). A contemporary carpet fragment from Herat with animal and floral motifs is in the Museo Civico in Turin (Curatola, 1983, p. 80).

The two Italian museums that hold the largest number of Islamic armor are the Museo Stibbert in Florence and the Armeria of the Royal Palace in Turin. Some of the Safavid pieces in these collections are of exquisite quality. The Museo Stibbert houses entire suits of armor and a fine knife with an ivory handle, and blade decorated with gold, dating to the 16th to 17th century (Inv. no. 6459), while the Armeria has two swords with blades inlaid in gold and silver, dating to the 16th century (Inv. nos G. 98 and G. 99; Curatola, ed., 1993, pp. 435-36, cat. 283). Armor and weapons from the 18th and 19th century are held by other Italian collections, such as those in the Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale and the Fondazione Caetani *apud* the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei (Di Flumeri Vatielli, pp. 329-37), both in Rome, and in the Museo di Palazzo Fortuny in Venice (Curatola, ed., 1993, pp. 433-35, cat. 280, 282).

There are many illustrated manuscripts preserved in Italian collections, such as those from the Il-khanid and Timurid periods in the Berenson Collection at Villa "I Tatti" in Settignano (Florence), which houses a leaf of the Great Mongol *Šāh-nāma* showing Esfandiār approaching Goštāsp (qq.v.), a leaf from a manuscript of a *Ẓafar-nāma* (Shiraz, June-July 1436) illustrating Timur receiving guests at the marriage of his son, Jahāngir, and an anthology from Herāt (1 Šawwāl 830 A.H./26 July 1427), copied for the Timurid prince Bāysonqor (Curatola, ed., 1993, pp. 271-72, 364-65, cat. 157, 220). An important Timurid illustrated manuscript of the *Šāh-nāma*, from Shiraz, dated to the second half of the 15th century (Ms. Cl.III.48;

Curatola, ed., 1993, pp. 368-69, cat. 223), is in the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale in Florence. A Safavid *Šāh-nāma* of good quality, dating to 20 Rabi' I 977 A.H./2 September 1569, is in the Biblioteca Nazionale in Naples (Ms. III.G.68; Fontana, 1980).

Safavid illustrated manuscripts are also preserved in other collections, and in the Library of the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei and the Casanatense Library, both in Rome, and the Biblioteca Comunale in Palermo (see Piemontese). Special mention must be made of the collection of archaeological finds of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Ghazni, at present lent by the Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente (ISIAO) to the Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale in Rome. There are many marble slabs, architectural elements in terracotta and alabaster, and objects in ceramic and metalwork from the Ghaznavid Palace of Mas'ud III (1099-1115; [PLATE IV](#)), and some pottery vessels from the so-called "House of Luster-Painted Wares" (Bombaci; Scerrato, 1959). There are also a few marble tombstones from Ghazni and its environs, belonging to a long period between the 12th and 16th century, in the same museum (Giunta, pp. 9, 109-11, 169-70, 217-18, 232-37, cat. 16, 30, 47, 53-54).

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