

Christian-Muslim relations and Oxford University Museums

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What stories of Muslim-Christian relations do objects reveal, and what were the situations lying behind their production? Even a brief glimpse at some objects in Oxford begins to reveal the intertwined history of Christians and Muslims.

Oxford is extremely rich in Islamic art. The recent revamp of the Ashmolean Museum has provided an Islamic gallery on the first floor, in which there is an extensive display of ceramics, tiles, metalwork, glass, enamels, ivory, woodwork and textiles, including a useful wall-case showing the key characteristics of Islamic art – calligraphy, geometry, the arabesque and figural art. A separate gallery is devoted to the art of the Mughals (the ruling Muslim dynasty in India 16th-19th century).

One particularly interesting item on display in the Ashmolean's Islamic gallery is a pair of 14th century window shutters from a Coptic church in Cairo. They are of geometric interlocking pieces of wood, into which have been set ebony and ivory stars and other shapes. The most obvious feature is the Christian cross which ornaments alternate stars. However, a close look at the other decorative elements brings to light arabesques, which would be equally at home in a 14th century mosque setting. Here we have a brilliant example of the way in which artisans in medieval Islamic society worked for both religious communities, Muslim and Christian. The artistic vocabulary of the two communities had by this time become virtually identical. However, the key elements or symbols used by the different faiths remained particular to that faith – the cross for Christians, the name of the Prophet Muhammad or a short Arabic Qur'anic quotation for Muslims. All the artisan had to do was put the right symbol on the object and then it was ready for the particular patron who had commissioned it. This type of approach was widespread in medieval times, and can be tracked in the

illustrated manuscripts produced in Iraq and Syria in the 13th century, and in the inlaid metalwork which was the speciality of Mosul at this period. It is interesting that the commonalities in artistic style persist alongside periodic waves of persecution of Christians in 14th century Egypt. So shared artistic vocabulary does not automatically indicate harmony between faith communities.

Trade was a major player in the way Muslims and Christians interacted around the Mediterranean. Its importance may be gauged from the fact that at different periods Christian and Muslim rulers issued coins directly related to those of their opponents. Thus, for example, the Crusader states on the Levantine coast in the late 12th and early 13th centuries issued copies of Fatimid Egyptian gold dinars, while in the 15th century the Mamluks of Egypt and Syria issued gold coins of the same weight and size as the contemporary Venetian ducat. One of these ducats is exhibited in the Museum's Mediterranean Gallery. Even in times of tension business goes on, and it is interesting to reflect on what other forms of imitation were prompted by the practical need to interact with the religious 'Other'.

Also in the Mediterranean Gallery is a fascinating little group of fragmentary ceramic bowls, known in an Italian context as 'bacini'. Embedded in the walls of the 11th and 12th century churches of the Italian city of Pisa are a huge number of such bacini, many coming from Muslim Sicily, North Africa and Syria. There is in the Ashmolean a fragment of Syrian origin from an Italian church. How did it get there? Did money speak more loudly than faith, so that religious curiosity or suspicion were set aside for business purposes? Or did trade lead to relationships which were more than purely pragmatic?

Another important interface between Christians and Muslims is reflected in the Ashmolean: the conquest and re-conquest of Spain. Golden Hispano-

Moresque lustre ceramics produced in Manises in the 15th century are now displayed in the Maiolica gallery. These followed a tradition of lustre-painted, tin-glazed (i.e. white-glazed) wares which first appeared in 9th century Iraq, and from there moved westwards, providing Fatimid Egypt with a remarkable industry in the 10th-12th century, and reaching Spain sometime perhaps in the 12th century. The industry flourished in Murcia and Almeria, but above all in Malaga, and by the end of the 13th century Malaga was exporting its wares far and wide. As the Christians reconquered the kingdom of Granada during the 2nd half of the 14th-15th centuries, Muslim craftsmen began working for Christian patrons, producing spectacularly grand lustre ware dishes and albarellos (tall, waisted jars) for display in the mansions of the wealthy. Soon the technology reached Italy, where it formed the basis of maiolica, the great decorative ceramic tradition of Renaissance Italy. For all the negative aspects of military solutions to Christian-Muslim tensions, it appears that the reconquest, far from destroying an indigenous tradition, offered it greater scope for development through new patronage and through the extensive trading contacts of Catholic Spain and Italy. The relationship between trade relations and interfaith relations here is far from straightforward – in this example conquest eventually leads to newly-opened markets for the conquered craftsmen.

Even in these few examples from Oxford, we glimpse the complexity of the stories of Muslim-Christian relations captured within objects of beauty or coins. How many more stories lie waiting to be explored?

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