

Kjeld von Folsach and Joachim Meyer. *The Human Figure in Islamic Art. Holy Men, Princes, and Commoners*. Copenhagen: The David Collection, 2017. 280 pp. ISBN 978-8792949-96-7.

There is still time to catch this exhibition at the David Collection Museum in Copenhagen, where it closes on 13 May 2018. And one should make a point of visiting, not only for this special, coordinated selection from the museum's treasures, but to see the rest of the collection, whose Islamic holdings are among the most important anywhere in the world. Don't, however, arrive with busloads of other tourists, as the museum spaces are intimate, which makes for a wonderful viewing experience but cannot accommodate huge crowds all at once. The website photos of the corridors and rooms where the exhibition is mounted emphasize how stunning it must be to see the material there, each painting or object highlighted like a gem against the dark background of the wall where it is displayed.

I have written before in this journal about the David Collection (see Vol. 12 [2014]: 132–36 + Pl. IX, and Vol. 14 [2016]: 241–42), but when a copy of the latest special exhibition catalog, under review here, arrived unsolicited in my mail, I had to write about it.

The virtues of this book and others the museum has published are many, starting with the careful text oriented toward non-specialist readers but including enough tantalizing detail and analogy to keep even specialists reading. With the exception of one essay, by Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, on "Human Figures in the Modern Muslim World," the rest is the work of the museum's director, Kjeld von Folsach, and the senior curator, Joachim Meyer. One might suspect here that the motivation for the choice of subject was the controversy provoked by a Danish newspaper's having published cartoons denigrating the Prophet Muhammad, but that would be a simplistic view, especially given the fact that it was not the publication of human imagery as such which was at the core of the controversy, but the uses to which it was put. As the essays here make very clear, religious opinions in the Islamic world regarding what was permissible in the arts evolved over time and are by no means uniform, and, whatever might have become a canonical barrier to such representations in a religious context, there was really never a time when in other contexts it was impossible to depict living beings and in particular humans. In short, any considered assessment of

the achievements of the arts in the Islamic world (and those achievements are legion) must take into account how and why humans were depicted and try to understand how they were viewed. Not least in interest is the possibility that the visual material can shed light on aspects of daily life that otherwise might not be clear just from written texts. In conveying these understandings, von Folsach and Meyer have succeeded admirably.

As is the case both on the museum's website and in the books it publishes, the image quality is superb — there is no better museum photography than that by Pernille Klemp, who does all their work. Given the generous "coffee-table" format of the volume, one can view all the art in life or larger-than-life size, each object displayed on a full page with facing explanatory text. While there are a few comparative examples shown from other sources, the exhibition has been drawn from the David Collection itself, some of the items well known from having been on regular display there for many years, others less frequently seen (one cannot expose manuscript pages and textiles to very strong light over extended periods without their deteriorating), and some newly shown, among them recent acquisitions. Few museums can boast of being able to compose a coherent special exhibition relying on in-house resources, a fact which tells you something about the richness of this collection.

The material is grouped under various topical headings, which means that in each section there is geographical and chronological diversity. The chapters include: "Figurative Depictions and Opposition to Them," "Ornament, Decoration and Symbol," "Scientific Illustrations and Other Uses for Miniature Painting," "The Religious Sphere" ..., "Love," and several others. Each section has a short introduction that highlights what the images selected for it demonstrate and how they fit together under the rubric that has been chosen.

Do I have some favorites here? My choices may not necessarily be for all the right reasons (that is, connected with the purpose and theme of the exhibition), but here they are. Among the miniatures, one of the earliest preserved Islamic world paintings dated 1219 (Cat. 34, on deposit from the Royal Library), a frontispiece



Image source: <https://www.davidmus.dk/files/a/71423/12.16-D1-1990-Kitab-al-Aghani-miniature-galleri.jpg>

Fig. 1. Miniature from volume 20 of a copy of Abu'l-Faraj al-Isfahani's *Kitab al Aghani*. Iraq, Mosul; 616 AH=1219 CE. 28.5 x 21.5 cm. Permanent loan from the Royal Library; David Collection Inv. no. D 1/1990.

to a copy of al-Isfahani's *Book of Songs* (*Kitab al-aghani*), is absolutely stunning, in part for the unusual textile designs [Fig. 1]. It is of interest in part for the way it incorporates some artistic motifs from non-Islamic traditions and for the fact that the patron (identified by his name on the *tiraz* band on the rider's sleeve) was an Armenian slave who eventually rose to become the *de facto* ruler of the Mosul region under the Zangid dynasty.

As my notes at the end of this volume of *The Silk Road* may suggest, I happen to like depictions of boats and the indications of who and what they carry. So there are three miniatures in the exhibit that leaped off the page at me. One is the ferry full of passengers crossing a river on a page of an early 13th-century Dioscorides manuscript (Cat. 22) [Fig. 2]. As the commentary mentions, there are analogous images in several other illuminated Islamic manuscripts [Fig. 3]. The second is a Timurid illustration of Noah's ark

Figs. 1, 2, 4 and 5 are all photographs by Pernille Klemp; copyright The David Collection, downloaded from the museum's website.



Image source: https://www.davidmus.dk/files/3/5/371/Coyright_5-1997_recto-The-David-Collection.-Copenhagen-Photo-Pernille-Klemp_web.jpg

Fig. 2 (below left). Miniature from a copy of *Kitab al-ha-shaish*, an Arabic translation of Dioscorides's *De Materia Medica*. "A Ferry Crossing the Gagos River." Iraq, Baghdad?; 1224. Leaf: 32.2 x 24 cm. David Collection Inv. no. 5/1997.

Fig. 3. Manuscript page from the *al-Maqāmāt al-ḥarīriyah* (*The assemblies of al-Hariri*), copied and illustrated in 1237 by Yahya ibn Mahmud al-Wasiti. Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Arabe 5847, fol. 119v.



Image source: Bibliothèque nationale de France <<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8422965p/1248.highres>>



Image source: https://www.davidmus.dk/files/3/16/285/16_2-8-2005-Noahs-ark-Hafiz-Abru-2.jpg

Fig. 4. Miniature from Hafiz-i Abru's *Majma al-tawarikh*. "Noah's Ark." Iran (Afghanistan), Herat; c. 1425. Leaf: 42.3 × 32.6 cm. David Collection Inv. no. 8/2005.

(Cat. 25) [Fig. 4], where the animals populate the hold and the humans the upper deck. The image is a good reminder of the place Biblical texts and figures occupy in Islamic belief, and this particular image also is striking for its bank of Chinese-style clouds, which are among the most common borrowings from China that populate Islamic miniature painting. Lastly, again thinking about cross-cultural mixing, often of greatest interest where seen in paintings with specific Islamic religious associations, look at the miniature painted in Isfahan at the very beginning of the 17th century (Cat. 31) [Fig. 5], illustrating a copy of Sa'adi's *Bustan*. It is of interest for what it tells us about the meeting of the European and Middle Eastern worlds, the ship clearly a European one and out of place as simply a ferry at a river crossing, even as its passengers are characters in an autobiographical part of the text involving meeting with a dervish. The picture reminds us of the abundant other evidence about cultural intermixing in that period, so vividly to be seen in the works created for Shah Abbas I in his capital [Fig. 6]. The essay here tells us that the manuscript was one donated by the Shah to the family shrine at Ardabil, which also was the recipient of his monumental collection of Chinese porcelain. As a Russianist, interested in the cultural encounter between traditional Orthodox Russia and

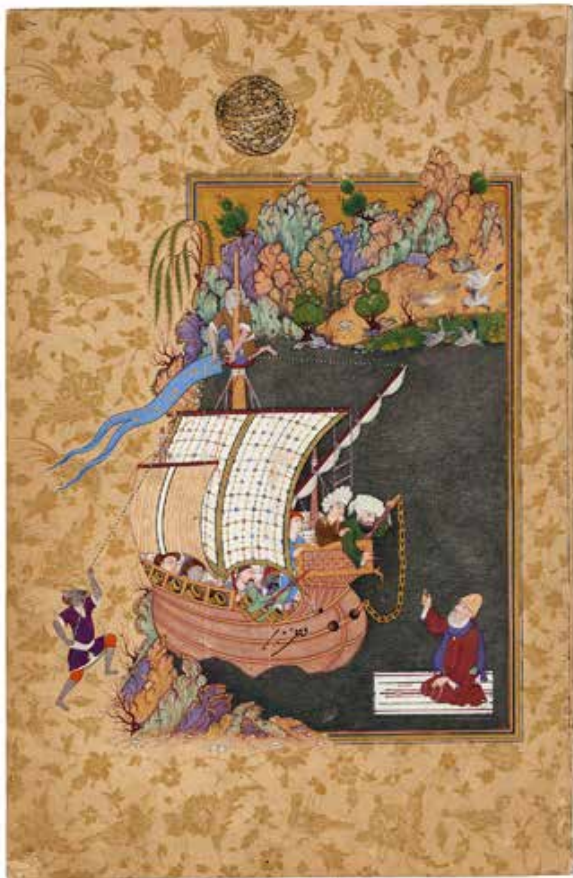


Image source: https://www.davidmus.dk/files/8/1/4328/Copyright_David-Collection_Copenhagen_11-2016_recto_ivrid_web.jpg

Fig. 5 (below left). Miniature from a copy of Sadi's *Bustan*. "The Dervish from Faryab Crosses the River on his Rug," attributed to Habiballah. Iran, Isfahan; c. 1600–1608. Leaf: 28.5 × 18.5 cm. David Collection Inv. no. 11/2016.

Fig. 6. Isfahan. Qaysariyya Gate into the bazaar, detail of painting showing European musicians at a court entertainment. Safavid period, early 17th century.

Photo by Daniel C. Waugh



Western Europe in the 17th century, I can see some possible parallels to pursue with what is happening at the same time (or somewhat earlier) in the Islamic world.

I could go on — each treasure tugs at the heartstrings and stimulates the imagination....

It is always of interest to see how a special exhibition, both while it is on and after it has closed, may be represented on a museum's website. In this regard, the David Collection has a unique opportunity, drawing as it does on its own holdings, to provide the exhibition with a long afterlife. Whether or not that will happen as it *could* remains to be seen though. The web pages for the current show are analogous to those created for the *Shahnama* exhibition they mounted two years ago: a decent introductory overview text, some photos of the gallery spaces, and a selection of a dozen or fifteen of the objects, where one can click to bring up the images and descriptive pages that are in place already in the chronologically arranged other sections of the museum's collections web pages. The pictures are superb — one can bring up huge, detailed images that allow seeing every detail (and can be downloaded). The text already on the museum web pages, to which one is given the link here, overlaps with that in the new exhibition book, but the latter contains more detailed analysis and clearly has been re-written so as to link each of the essays and its object with other parts of the exhibit as a whole. One does not get that same linkage from the texts created separately for the website and presumably some time ago. So, one could, in theory, find everything in the special exhibit on line with a decent individual description, but

lacking the connecting linkages that make the current exhibition so compelling. It should be easy enough to bridge more effectively the gap between the focused show and the rest of the collection.

My other suggestion here is something I have frequently noted in the past about museum exhibitions and websites. While it is common enough for the art historians and curators to tell us about analogous examples in various collections or *in situ* at historic sites, all too rarely do they illustrate them (even if all we might expect would be something less than a magnificent full-page image) so the reader could actually see the comparison. The David Collection website does contain pages with illustrations of coinage or architecture from the different dynasties or periods the collection encompasses, but both there and especially here in the volume under review, are many what I would term "missed opportunities." For example, the possibilities to have contextualized visually in this exhibit the abundant Safavid and Mughal material are numerous.

So I wonder then, when the current exhibit ends in May and enough copies of the book have been sold, whether there might not be an initiative to give this superb exhibition a much fuller and longer life than has been done for other special exhibitions. Perhaps the essays could all be posted and linked seamlessly using technologies that are already adequate to the task. The David Collection has the resources and the vision to do this, and those who cannot make it to Copenhagen right now would be in their debt.

— Daniel C. Waugh