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In support of the preservation and revival of craft traditions in the Arab world



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DECORATIVE TEXTILES FROM ARAB & ISLAMIC CULTURES SELECTIONS FROM THE AL LULWA COLLECTION

JENNIFER WEARDEN, WITH INTRODUCTION BY JENNIFER SCARCE
PREFACE BY ALTAF S. AL SABAH

One of the most distinctive features of Islamic design is the evolution of an increasingly abstract and repetitive repertoire of motifs, which are shared among all media – metalwork, woodwork, ceramics, tilework and textiles. In textiles the main themes are based on angular and geometric shapes – vertical and horizontal striped bands; hexagons and octagons, which can be linked and infinitely extended; stylized and rhythmic scrolls of foliage and flowers; and Arabic calligraphy, of which the letters can be formed into continuous borders, panels and medallions. These motifs can be used separately or combined into complex patterns, of which the repetitive and two-dimensional features are ideal for textile production, especially where varying lengths are required – for hangings, curtains, robes and shawls. Valued for their role in the subtleties of court ceremonial and fashion, these textiles were also much admired beyond the Islamic lands.

The Al Lulwa Collection, the Altaf Al Sabah assemblage of late Arab and Islamic textiles, of which a selection is presented here, ranges widely in region, material and technique. There are textiles and garments from North Africa, Syria, Arabia, Iran, Turkey and the Indian subcontinent linked by a shared vocabulary of ornament – evidence of the international nature of Islamic design. Materials represented are silk – the most prestigious of fibres, requiring highly respected weavers – wool, cotton and linen. Decoration is based on variations of weave and colour and embellishment through embroidery, printing and appliqué and illustrates the work of both professional and domestic workers.

The strengths of the collection are concentrated in the textile production of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which, thanks to the basically conservative nature of textile technique and design, preserve and continue the traditions established in the medieval Islamic world. They are important in an assessment of Islamic textiles both for their quality and as illustrations of survival and adaptation in a major industry. Their heritage reaches back well over a thousand years, and it is important that it is preserved and continued today.

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Zakat

Woven silk embroidered with floss silk with added floss silk threads
Moscow, Uzbek, late 19th-early 20th century
11 mm x 55 cm x w 69 cm

This is a wide sarak, called a *sarak*, which would have been folded lengthways and used to secure a woman's trousers around her waist. The ground of this sarak was almost always white and this one has been woven with a design of leafy scrolls, white on white, like patterns in silk. In complete contrast, black thread has been used to create an extremely strong outline around the scrolls and leaves in the embroidered border. There were once brightly coloured with pink, orange and green but they have faded a little over time. Great care has been taken to ensure that the embroidery is double-sided, that is, the same on the back and the front, so that nothing less than perfection is seen at the ends of the neck, away with the most movement. To add length, weight, texture and additional movement to the sarak, complex fringe have been added to the ends. These are formed by long groups of threads attached to the white silk ground, crossed and secured by short silk threads to form a net. The coloured bands form a pattern of diamonds and half diamonds which create an *an'chim* contrast, that is, between the gentle curve of the scrolls and leaves and the singularity of the diamonds. *Don't*

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Tarzifa (part)

Silk and cotton satin embroidered with floss silk
Moscow, Tatarstan, 19th century
11 cm x 65 cm x w 65 cm

This brilliantly coloured length of satin was made to hang in front of a mirror, covering the reflective glass and swivelling off the eye. The end piece of the silk embroidered with isolated motifs would have been sewed on a back or wall above the mirror, the two halves would have been neatly folded to form a pointed arch and the two ends, with their mass of embroidered flowers, would hang side by side over the glass, one of these ends is missing. A mirror cover or *soyga* such as this was used during festivals and would also have been draped over a woman's mirror for a period of three days after her wedding to protect her from evil and from jealousy. Only the end borders are heavily decorated because only they remain visible or undamaged as they hang in front of the glass. The pattern is traditional and always consists of a vertical stem with a large blossom on either side and a curving arrangement of leaves separating these from the flower heads which extend to the sides. Along the bottom there is a narrow band of white embroidery or *soyga*, which was replaced by a strip of ribbon in more modern pieces. Mirror covers in this form are unique to Tatarstan. *Don't*

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Two panels from a curtain

Linen embroidered with silk
Ottoman, late 19th-early 20th century
11 cm x 55 cm x w 69 cm

Curtains were not common in an Ottoman house but they were occasionally used in *divans*, one *divan* and one *harem* fitted into niches in the walls. These widths of embroidery from would have been sewn together to make the curtain, the two side pieces would have been identical but the central one was usually a mirror image of the others with its pattern and colours reversed. The strong colours of these panels – red and blue with small amounts of green, white and yellow – are typical of Ottoman embroidery in the 19th and early 20th centuries. There is no shading, only solid colour. Originally the white motifs would have been outlined with black but, because black dye is used with an iron mordant, they eventually wear. Most fibres require a mordant in the form of a metallic salt to bind the pigment. The dye that is obtained is a deep black colour, if the embroidery thread would have been fixed with an iron mordant and over the years that an oxidised – it rusted – causing the black dye thread to disintegrate and fall out leaving only stitches to mark the fact that it had once been there. *Don't*

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