

## **Oxford's History of Science Museum reopens with onsite and online exhibition of rare Islamic metalwork**

***Precious and Rare: Islamic Metalwork from The Courtauld  
Cultures in Conversation***

**9 October 2020 – 10 January 2021**

**History of Science Museum, Oxford**

**Free admission but pre-booking is required**

**Images can be downloaded at:**

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/ruvz588ifdn4lqd/AAD6pEzOMlfrLUn8AXw1xE0wa?dl=0>



**OXFORD, 5 October 2020** – *Precious and Rare: Islamic Metalwork from The Courtauld*, a new exhibition at the History of Science Museum provides a modern day interpretation on Islamic metalwork spanning the 11th to 16th centuries, with an accompanying online exhibition and contributions by the local community. The exhibition opens on the day that the History of Science Museum reopens its doors to the public – Friday, 9 October 2020.

The exhibition will explore how the intersections of cultures across the Islamic world influenced the creation of this metalwork, some of the finest produced. Part of a national tour supported by Art Fund and in partnership with the Subject Specialist Network for Islamic Art and Material Culture, the exhibition features a stunning array of objects on loan from The Courtauld, many never seen outside of London before this tour. These include a delicate candlestick made to a precise size and weight, rare brass bowls inlaid with silver and a 14<sup>th</sup> century bucket for everyday use, all elaborately designed. They will be displayed alongside the History of Science Museum's own world-class collection of scientific instruments from the Islamic World.

The exhibition will also examine the intricate designs and styles that made these metal pieces so renowned – and imitated – by civilisations around the globe. Signs of the zodiac, constellations, the planets and coats of arms all feature. Islamic metalwork is renowned for its exquisite craftsmanship and the skill behind this work will be showcased through on-screen content.

The highlight of the exhibition is a woman's metal handbag, the only surviving example of its kind. It was made in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century in Mosul, northern Iraq for an important lady based in the courtly circles of the Ilkhanid dynasty. This handbag, known as the Courtauld Bag and decorated

with images of eight musicians playing instruments, shows the incredible metalworking skills passed down through generations.

To ensure as many people as possible can experience the exhibition, the History of Science Museum has responded to the current climate by creating a full online exhibition that will also include objects and stories not seen in the physical exhibition. There will be modern 'Cultures in Conversation' as the online exhibition will include input from visitors and social media. Visit [www.hsm.ox.ac.uk/islamicmetalwork](http://www.hsm.ox.ac.uk/islamicmetalwork) (to go live on 9 October).

The museum has taken a unique approach to the online exhibition by working with Oxford-based volunteers with a cultural connection to these objects, who provided their own perspective based on their personal and cultural knowledge. The volunteers came to the UK as forced migrants from countries including Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Zimbabwe and Sudan. For the online exhibition they will be sharing their own objects that build on and complement the objects from The Courtauld and the History of Science Museum. Many of the volunteers have been working with the museum for some time as part of a project called Multaka, which means 'meeting place' in Arabic.

One volunteer, Jonathan Fruchter, has created an interactive digital programme through which online visitors can design their own Islamic inspired patterns. Jonathan said, "I was amazed by the intricacy of the patterns of some of the objects. I decided to digitize the pattern on the handbag, and was inspired to create a symmetric-pattern-generating computer programme. The programme is based on the "type" of symmetry most common in Islamic art, and allows the user to design their own Islamic-influenced repetitive patterns with just a few lines and brush strokes. Mathematics is usually perceived as intimidating and very dry. I think that this exhibition is a great opportunity to share a bit of my knowledge and show people that maths can be beautiful and fun!"

This approach provides a new way for visitors to understand and appreciate these objects. Moreover, the wealth of knowledge and understanding the volunteers bring has a lasting legacy: it is being added to the museums' database and shared with the wider community through multi-lingual events, tours, blogs and displays, but most importantly the museum's working practices have become more inclusive and collaborative.

Dr. Silke Ackermann, Director of the History of Science Museum, said: "*Precious and Rare: Islamic Metalwork from The Courtauld* gives us insight into the craft and the science of Islamic metalworking. Our interpretation of the exhibition beautifully reveals how ideas and stories have travelled across time and territory, language and medium. Work to create this exhibition took place through the COVID-19 pandemic and we had to repeatedly pivot as we largely communicated through a new medium – online; it has certainly proved to be our most dynamic display yet. We are delighted by the contribution made by the Multaka volunteers and grateful for The Courtauld's generosity and their partnership – this collaboration has been an absolute joy and we have learnt a huge amount in the process."

Dr Alexandra Gerstein, McQueens, Curator of Sculpture and Decorative Arts at The Courtauld said: "We are thrilled to partner with Oxford's History of Science Museum on the *Precious & Rare* tour and to be the first exhibition on display when the museum reopens to the public. The exhibition provides an opportunity for people to experience and enjoy some of the most treasured art works from both The Courtauld and History of Science Museum's collections and to find out more about their fascinating history."

The *Cultures in Conversation* online exhibition will include all the objects and stories from the physical exhibition, with opportunities to explore additional content and get close-up with more

information. There will be videos offering behind the scenes access with the Curator and Multaka volunteers. There'll be even more cultural conversations to explore online. Visit [www.hsm.ox.ac.uk/islamicmetalwork](http://www.hsm.ox.ac.uk/islamicmetalwork)

*Precious and Rare* will be accompanied by an engaging programme of free virtual talks and online events at the History of Science Museum including an Islamic Science lecture series, an event as part of Oxford's Christmas Light Festival co-produced with Multaka volunteers and a [Symposium](#) in partnership with The Courtauld and Ashmolean Museum. For more information visit [www.hsm.ox.ac.uk/whatson](http://www.hsm.ox.ac.uk/whatson) (to go live on 9 October).

The History of Science Museum is looking forward to reopening its doors to the public on 9 October. In order to make the experience as safe and enjoyable as possible, all visitors will be required to pre-book a free timed ticket online [here](#). Further information on safety measures in place at the museum can be found online, from 5 October, at [www.hsm.ox.ac.uk/plan-your-visit](http://www.hsm.ox.ac.uk/plan-your-visit)

**ENDS**



**The Courtauld Art Fund**



For further information, image requests or a preview of the exhibition please contact:

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## **NOTES TO EDITORS**

### **About the History of Science Museum**

The History of Science Museum houses an unrivalled collection of historic scientific instruments in the world's oldest surviving purpose-built museum building, the Old Ashmolean on Broad Street, Oxford. By virtue of the collection and the building, the Museum occupies a special position, both in the study of the history of science and in the development of Museum culture and collecting.

The present collection preserves the material of past science. As a department of the University of Oxford, the Museum has a role both in making this material available for study by historians, and presenting it to the visiting public. The Museum offers a programme of special exhibitions, events, tours and school sessions in order to engage the public with the fascinating history, and future, of science.

### **About the Multaka project and volunteers**

Multaka, which means 'meeting point' in Arabic, is a project led by the History of Science Museum and Pitt Rivers Museum, part of Oxford University's Gardens, Libraries and Museums. Through the support of local community organisations Asylum Welcome and Refugee Resource, over 50 volunteers were introduced to the museum and have since been working with museum staff to run tours of the collections in Arabic and English, plan and deliver events, co-curate displays, enhance collections documentation and manage social media channels. This activity has provided on-the-job training and offered skills development as well as fostering a sense of inclusion and community.

### **About The Courtauld**

The Courtauld works to advance how we see and understand the visual arts, as an internationally-renowned centre for the teaching, research and enjoyment of art history. Founded in the 1930s, the organisation has been at the forefront of developing the field of art history ever since.

The Courtauld cares for one of the greatest art collections in the UK, displayed at The Courtauld Gallery in Somerset House, central London. Academically, The Courtauld faculty is the largest group of art historians in the UK, and offers a range of programmes in the History of Art, curating and the conservation of easel and wall paintings.

The Courtauld Gallery is currently closed and teaching relocated to Kings Cross as part of Courtauld Connects, an ambitious transformation programme that will make The Courtauld's world-class artworks, research and teaching accessible to even more people. The first stage of Courtauld Connects will be completed in 2021, with the reopening of The Courtauld Gallery and the Learning Centre at Somerset House.

### **Precious and Rare UK tour**

The project is led by The Courtauld's Curator of Sculpture and Decorative Arts, Alexandra Gerstein, alongside Amy Graves, Registrar Exhibitions and Projects. Additionally, Janet O'Brien, a PhD Candidate at The Courtauld Institute of Art, has drafted research reports on the objects on loan in support of the tour.

The project's tour venues were selected by Alexandra Gerstein, Rebecca Bridgman, Curator of Islamic and South Asian Arts at Birmingham Museums Trust, and Mariam Rosser-Owen, Curator of the Middle Eastern Section, Asian Department, Victoria & Albert Museum.

The Courtauld's Tour of Islamic Metalwork is organised in collaboration with the Subject Specialist Network (SSN) in Islamic Art and Material Culture at Birmingham Museums Trust and is supported by Art Fund.

### **In partnership with Specialist Network for Islamic Art and Material Culture**

The SSN for Islamic Art and Material Culture (hereafter SSN IAMC), hosted by Birmingham Museums Trust, is a national organisation for museum professionals. It shares ideas, knowledge and best practice in historic museum collections from regions where Islam was, or is the dominant religion, and in art and artefacts from the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries influenced by or associated with those regions. Its mission is to build confidence amongst museum staff across the country through specialist support packages and programmes of professional skills development in collections and engagement. The organisation's vision is to help museum staff to unlock the potential of collections, providing a mechanism through which audiences that are reflective of the diversity of contemporary England can be engaged and grown.

<http://krc.orient.ox.ac.uk/iamcssn>

### **Supported by Art Fund**

Art Fund is the national fundraising charity for art. It provides millions of pounds every year to help museums to acquire and share works of art across the UK, further the professional development of their curators, and inspire more people to visit and enjoy their public programmes. Art Fund is independently funded, supported by the 159,000 members who buy the National Art Pass, who enjoy free entry to over 240 museums, galleries and historic places, 50% off major exhibitions, and receive Art Quarterly magazine. Art Fund also supports museums through its annual prize, Art Fund Museum of the Year, which was won by St Fagans National Museum of History, Cardiff, in 2019, and through a range of digital platforms. [www.artfund.org](http://www.artfund.org)