

## MIDDLE-EASTERN OBJECTS

ANNA CONTADINI



21.1 Perfume burner,  
probably west Iran,  
1450–1500  
(cat.195)

APPRECIATION OF ISLAMIC ARTEFACTS in Italy began during the medieval period, as is abundantly demonstrated by gifts made to the Church now held in religious treasuries. This pattern of acquisition was continued and developed during the period 1400–1600, with maritime republics providing one of the main routes for the activity. Middle-Eastern influences were thus transmitted not only through Sicily and southern Italy but also through Genoa, Pisa, Lucca, Siena, Florence, Amalfi and, of course, Venice. We know from documents in the Venetian archives that one of the biggest yearly expenses of the republic from the thirteenth century was the import of precious textiles from the Middle East. Carpets were to remain staples, but the trade in textiles, glass, ceramics and metalwork was also significant, despite market fluctuations.

Trade with the Near East was first conducted mainly with the major cities in Egypt and Syria, which were ruled by the Mamluks – the terms ‘damask’ (from Damascus) and ‘muslin’ (from Mosul) bear witness to this connection. But under the Mamluks’ successors, the Ottomans, Anatolian centres of production came to the fore, and after 1453 the newly dominant position of Ottoman Constantinople attracted a strong Venetian, Florentine and Genoese mercantile presence. An alternative early source was Mongol-controlled Persia, where the Florentines and the Sienese were active by the end of the thirteenth century, with contacts continuing until the early fifteenth century. The result was a massive import of textiles, especially silks, from China and Turkestan – the ‘Tartar and Turkish cloths’ mentioned by Dante.<sup>1</sup>

Imported Islamic wares reflected the flourishing mercantile activities that lay behind so much of Italy’s success in this period. Moreover, they were luxury commodities affordable only by the upper strata of society. They were therefore markers of economic status, but they also indicated aesthetic discernment, for both their ‘exotic’ appearance

and the superlative quality of their workmanship revealed the refined taste of their owners. The admiration they inspired provoked Islamicizing tendencies within Italian art itself, as well as the production of local imitations. It is possible to distinguish partially overlapping phases of acquisition, assimilation and imitation in this process and, through the diffusion of decorative motifs and techniques of production, trace the ways in which Islamic artefacts enriched the material culture and aesthetic horizons of Renaissance Italy. Consequently, we are able to understand something of how they were perceived within the context of the Italian Renaissance interior.

Islamic artefacts could be purely decorative, display pieces designed to impress and convey status as well as give pleasure. But they were often functional at the same time, serving, for example, to make fashionable and expensive clothing, or being used as ostentatious utensils at banquets. They also served other, more intimate functions in the house, finding their place in the bedroom or in the *studiolo*, where they might even give practical aid to the attempts of a humanist scholar to grapple with the religious and cultural environment from which they originated. It is important to note that engagement with the Islamic Middle East was by no means confined to trade, diplomacy or conflict: it also included an intellectual aspect. The printing press gave a new impetus to the dissemination of knowledge, with an Arabic font being created in Venice to produce both religious and scientific texts. The need for more accurate translations was felt, the first Arabic grammars appeared and, along with Hebrew, Arabic was viewed as a desirable addition to the university syllabus. Alongside classical texts, new Latin editions were printed of works such as Avicenna's *Canon* on medicine, indispensable to the library of a humanist scholar.

#### METALWORK

The complexity of artistic interaction between Italy and the Middle East is well illustrated by the numerous brass vessels, inlaid with silver and, less frequently, with gold and a black organic compound, that are traditionally dubbed 'Veneto-Saracenic'. Stylistically and technically,<sup>2</sup> the ornamentation of these objects is Islamic, and certain pieces bear

the signatures of Muslim craftsmen. Yet many are European in form, their decoration frequently includes Western coats of arms,<sup>3</sup> and the vast majority are found in European – and in particular Italian – collections. It has been suggested, in fact, that they were made in Italy, first by refugees from the defeated crusader kingdoms and later by Muslim craftsmen in Venice (whence the term 'Veneto-Saracenic').<sup>4</sup> But there is no documentary evidence to support the 'Veneto-Saracenic' hypothesis, and it has been largely abandoned.<sup>5</sup> That fine inlaid metalwork was imported from the Levant is noted by Vasari,<sup>6</sup> and it is now generally agreed that these pieces date from the second half of the fifteenth and the early sixteenth century and, European imitations excepted, were made in the Islamic world for the Western market.<sup>7</sup>

They do not, however, form a unified group, and there is uncertainty as to their provenance. They can be divided into three types.<sup>8</sup> One comprises metalwork produced in the closing decades of the Mamluk Empire, which fell to the Ottomans in 1517. These pieces are decorated in a recognizably Mamluk manner, with a preponderance of geometric interlace in the inlay work, but are distinguished by the absence of inscriptions and, often, by a distinctly European shape.<sup>9</sup>

One such piece is the perfume burner in plate 21.1.<sup>10</sup> Europe imported many such spheres, generally inlaid in the Veneto-Saracenic style. In the Islamic world, as in China where they originated, they were used for burning incense,<sup>11</sup> and two that belonged to the Medici (both today in the Bargello) are listed in an inventory of 1553 as 'profumieri damasceni'.<sup>12</sup> But if some retained this function,<sup>13</sup> others were employed as hand warmers, by clerics during Mass and by wealthy laypeople in the home:<sup>14</sup> two merchants from Prato and Pistoia, who were in Avignon in 1360, are recorded in an inventory as owning 'one sphere of gilded silver for warming the hands'.<sup>15</sup> When used as perfume burners they were sometimes hung, as in the 1532 portrait of Georg Gisze by Holbein which shows one of the larger spheres hanging by a chain from a hook on a shelf of the gentleman's study. The two Bargello spheres also have a chain,<sup>16</sup> and further visual evidence of these objects being hung from the ceiling can be found in Persian miniatures.<sup>17</sup>





21.2 The Molino Ewer, with the arms of the Molino family of Venice, possibly made in Flanders or Germany and probably decorated in Egypt or Syria, 1450–1500 (cat.62)

The example in plate 21.1 is of standard construction, with two brass hemispheres pierced with small round holes and decorated with engraving and inlay. Housed within is a receptacle mounted in a gimbal device to keep it level and prevent spillage, even if the ball was rolled. The sphere was thus also something of a mechanical curiosity, and as such would have held considerable appeal. Although portable, it would probably have been kept in the *camera* or *studiolo*, where it could be appreciated at close range.

Another splendid, if enigmatic, vessel belonging to this group is the so-called Molino Ewer (plate 21.2).<sup>18</sup> Executed by means of engraving and inlays of silver and a black compound, the Mamluk design of its decoration comprises a profusion of geometric interlace and vegetal scrollwork. Notable features are the broad register of interlace circumscribing the globular body that is rendered as a pseudo-inscription (derived from the early Arabic script known as Kufic), and the two roundels with inverted lotus blossoms on the neck. But particularly remarkable is a medallion on the lid bearing the coat of arms of the Molino, a patrician Venetian family that had mercantile links with the Levant.<sup>19</sup> What, then, is to be made of its shape, which is that of a type produced in Germany and Flanders during the second half of the fifteenth century?<sup>20</sup> We know that Middle-Eastern craftsmen could imitate occidental shapes, as demonstrated by an Iranian candlestick mentioned below,<sup>21</sup> but the likely explanation is that the ewer is a vessel of North European manufacture ornamented by Islamic craftsmen for a Western market,<sup>22</sup> and many Veneto-Saracenic pieces may likewise have been European-produced brasses sent to the East to be decorated.<sup>23</sup> A similarly shaped ewer in Naples has a blank shield on its neck,<sup>24</sup> suggesting a trade in stock products to be customized on their arrival in (or return to) Europe.

Regarding function, two main possibilities – both connected to the *sala* – suggest themselves: to pour drink<sup>25</sup> or to pour water in the elaborate hand-washing practice that took place before and after dining,<sup>26</sup> interestingly mirroring a similar type of ablution ritual in the Islamic world.<sup>27</sup> In his description of a rich gentleman's villa written between 1460 and 1464, the architect Filarete details this ceremony with six servants 'who looked like angels', each 'with a silver basin in one hand' and 'a ewer filled



21.3 Candlesticks with the arms of the Contarini family of Venice, brass, engraved and inlaid with gold and silver, Egypt or Syria, early 15th century (Museo Correr, Venice CIXII nn. 22, 23)



with water in the other',<sup>28</sup> dextrously pouring the liquid over the diners' hands and into the basins beneath; and the 1474 inventory of the trousseau of Caterina Pico, daughter of the Lord of Mirandola, records 'four brass basins with accompanying ewers [commonly dubbed *bronzini*] bearing in their centre silver coats of arms painted in enamel'.<sup>29</sup> The Molino Ewer is certainly too richly ornamented to have been a workaday object: it was probably proudly exhibited on a *credenza* (sideboard)<sup>30</sup> and only employed during grand banquets for its ostentatious display of the Molino coat of arms.

Also belonging to this group is a pair of mid-sixteenth-century Mamluk-produced candlesticks which were in the possession of another leading Venetian family (plate 21.3).<sup>31</sup> They have a short stem and a bell-shaped base carrying a flat drip-tray, and are decorated in a typically Mamluk manner with vegetal, floral and geometric designs. The base bears a shield of European shape that frames a

roundel containing diagonal stripes, the Contarini coat of arms.

Candlesticks of this type could have been used anywhere in the home, but paintings of religious scenes with contemporary domestic settings suggest that they were particularly favoured in the *camera*. Many examples of the Annunciation and the Birth of the Virgin include a candlestick – often of Islamic shape – placed on a shelf, mantelpiece or even headboard.<sup>32</sup> Another common context appears to have been the *studiolo*, as illustrated by numerous pictures of scholar-saints in their studies.<sup>33</sup> A calligrapher's *studiolo* represented in a Venetian woodcut published in 1525 includes just such a candlestick,<sup>34</sup> which with its single, small flame would have been well suited to the more confined spaces of the home. On the other hand, the Contarini pieces, being a pair and ornamented with the family's arms, might well have been intended for display in the more public areas.



The second group in the 'Veneto-Saracenic' category is typified by the use of silver wire inlays to create an expansive curvilinear network of medallions and scrolls. The effect is somewhat freer, for whereas the surfaces of the Mamluk pieces are divided into distinct zones, the patterns of this group are not as rigidly organized. Their fluidity and the minute detail of the decorative elements strongly recall Iranian metalwork of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, which remains the most convincing attribution. However, certain features of form and decoration serve to distinguish them from mainstream Persian production and suggest that they

may have been designed for export, possibly with Western sensibilities in mind.<sup>35</sup>

Among this second group are the famous pieces signed by Mahmud al-Kurdi ('the Kurd') and Zayn al-Din,<sup>36</sup> including a large bucket in the V&A produced by the latter master.<sup>37</sup> Made of brass intricately inlaid with silver and engraved, its walls are straight and almost perpendicular, curving at the bottom to form a flat base. A semicircular handle, the greater part of which is modelled as two serpents, rises from the walls of the bucket by means of two brackets, the inner faces of which are inscribed with the signature of Zayn al-Din. We know that buckets

21.4 Salver, probably western Iran,  
late 15th to early 16th century  
(cat.61)







21.5 Pair of candlesticks,  
Italy (probably Venice),  
mid-16th century  
(cat. 135)

of such form were used in the West as washbasins,<sup>38</sup> and it is not unlikely that this piece was exported to Europe and used in such a capacity.

Another impressive piece belonging to this group is a large salver (late fifteenth/early sixteenth century; plate 21.4).<sup>39</sup> Made of engraved and inlaid brass, it is shallow, with a wide, splayed rim. The inlay work is of silver and a black compound, and may originally have included gold. The striking focal point of the design is a central circular medallion containing a European coat of arms, in this case unidentified. From it radiates a rich network of lobed, scrolling and intertwining vegetal stems, rendered in silver against a ground of minute arabesques; the complexity and detail of the pattern make this dish an especially fine example. Such dishes could be used in several different ways and contexts. Some have a form with a central depression that appears to have been favoured for liturgical use in the Mass.<sup>40</sup> However, the piece illustrated, with its flat base and shield, belonged to the secular sphere and most probably to the *sala*, where it would have been exhibited on a *credenza* and employed for serving food during banquets or, once again, as part of the hand-washing ritual. As this custom

was largely for display, the amount of liquid poured was small and, as demonstrated by paintings of the period, would have posed no problem for a shallow dish.<sup>41</sup>

The third group comprises European imitations, which, because of their stylistic fidelity, may not have been previously distinguished from Islamic pieces. Aesthetically, they differ in having a more clearly compartmentalized organization of the decoration,<sup>42</sup> and technically by never being inlaid with the black organic compound.<sup>43</sup> A fine example is the pair of early fifteenth-century brass candlesticks in plate 21.5,<sup>44</sup> engraved and inlaid with silver. With a baluster stem that rests on a drip-tray carried on a broad and bulbous foot, the shape appears to have been developed in Renaissance Italy<sup>45</sup> and may be related to a type of Cinquecento Venetian wine-glass.<sup>46</sup> Its Italianate form does not preclude it from having been decorated or even manufactured in the Middle East, but a Western origin is confirmed by the ornamentation that is palpably different from that on Islamic metalwork: the lines appear comparatively disjointed, and the patterns they describe have a decidedly *all'antica* feel to them. Nevertheless, these candlesticks clearly strive towards a Middle-Eastern



typology and provide evidence of the prestige and desirability of Eastern metalwork in Renaissance Italy. Also in the V&A is a remarkable west Iranian candlestick of analogous form dating from the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century. Evidently copied from an Italian model, it demonstrates that stylistic transfer could be a two-way process.<sup>47</sup>

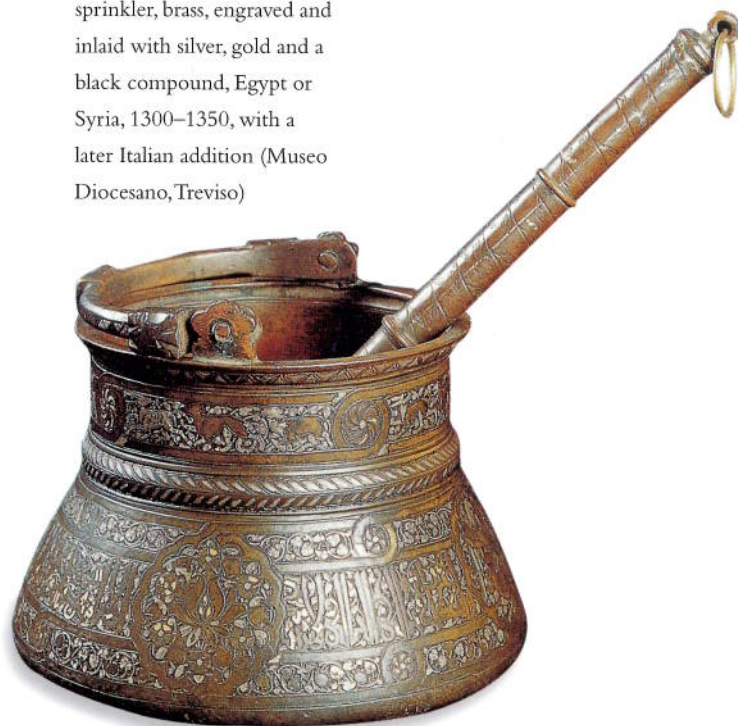
As well as producing imitations, Italian metalworkers responded creatively to Middle-Eastern types. Take, for instance, the sixteenth-century gilt brass object here described as a perfume burner but elsewhere considered to be a lamp (plate 21.6).<sup>48</sup>



21.6 Domed perfume burner, Venice, 16th century (cat.196)

Conceived as a *tholos* (a classical temple of circular plan), it has a cylindrical body marked by *all'antica* pilasters and a domed lid resting on an architrave-like moulding. Three lion-paw-shaped legs support this little temple, which is profusely decorated with relief work against a polychrome enamelled ground, with areas of filigree openwork between the pilasters and on the lid. Some of the ornamentation – particularly that on the pilasters and architrave – accords with the shape of the burner and is similarly classical, but the greater part is Islamic in derivation: the relief of arabesques on the lid, the panels between the pilasters, and the web of openwork formed by piercing the ground, are typically Islamic. What is remarkable is that these elements have been integrated with an otherwise classical idiom with surprisingly happy results, largely because the Islamic arabesque is not too far removed in nature from the scrollwork of antiquity. Objects of this type were evidently popular in Renaissance Italy, as several

21.7 Holy water bucket and sprinkler, brass, engraved and inlaid with silver, gold and a black compound, Egypt or Syria, 1300–1350, with a later Italian addition (Museo Diocesano, Treviso)





survive, almost all with Islamicizing decoration.<sup>49</sup> They may most probably be ascribed to sixteenth-century Venice, where the Islamic influence in metalwork was at its most pronounced. Three are almost identical to this burner and were probably made in the same workshop.<sup>50</sup>

The function of these objects is disputed. Some scholars consider them night lamps – that is to say, a sort of bedside light, and with its limited openwork our example could have provided a suitably subdued light. But it would have been equally apt for diffusing sweet fragrances, and the likelihood that it was used in this capacity is strengthened by its correspondence to a variety of Islamic incense burners that also took the form of a domed cylindrical vessel on three lions' feet. Examples of this type – which was first made in Mosul in the early thirteenth century, with production continuing in Syria in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries<sup>51</sup> – must surely have made their way to Italy, and may have served as inspiration.

A particularly interesting case of re-use is the transformation of an extraordinary Mamluk brass bucket, with silver and gold inlay, into a vessel for holy water to which was later added a sprinkler (plate 21.7). It can be dated to the first half of the fourteenth century and, according to the diocesan inventories, was already in Treviso in 1592.<sup>52</sup> The overall shape of the vessel, including the handle, presumably original, is almost identical to another bucket now in the Correr Museum in Venice.<sup>53</sup> Although much of the inlay is lost, it is in very good condition and is richly decorated on all surfaces, including the outer base, with six wonderful flying phoenixes, while the inner base has a decoration of vegetal motifs and rosettes. The secular decorative scheme includes a band of running animals and a predatory bird attacking a duck, with a poetic inscription in the middle band of the body. Conversion to sacred use may have taken place in the home, before its transfer to the church, and an indication of how it might have been used, in particular in the devotional context of the *camera*, comes from a painting by Carpaccio, *The Dream of St Ursula*, of 1490–95 (see plate 14.3): beside her bed is a religious image and, hanging from the bottom of its frame, a bucket of almost identical shape to the one in Treviso, with a handle and sprinkler.<sup>54</sup>

## CARPETS

We know from the Venetian archives that precious textiles from the Middle East were one of the Republic's biggest yearly expenses from the thirteenth century and that the most popular type of import was the knotted carpet. Carpet-making was extensively cultivated in the Muslim world, and the West eagerly consumed its products.<sup>55</sup> The trade dates back at least to the fourteenth century,<sup>56</sup> and although demand sometimes exceeded supply Western merchants were generally able to ensure a steady flow. Venetian merchants were in the vanguard of this enterprise, and they may even have been involved in carpet production, for we know of at least one case of a sixteenth-century Venetian trader resident in Egypt, Francesco da Priuli, who sponsored looms and oversaw their output.<sup>57</sup> Most imported carpets came from Turkey, some from Egypt, but few before the seventeenth century from Iran, which was less accessible than the Levantine regions.<sup>58</sup> Venice and the other Italian states dominated trade throughout the Renaissance, but from the sixteenth century onwards they faced increasing competition from north European – and particularly Dutch – merchants.<sup>59</sup>

The popularity of Eastern carpets is attested by the frequency with which they are depicted in Renaissance paintings.<sup>60</sup> These show the various ways in which they were employed, and have provided scholars with invaluable evidence for dating surviving examples. In the Islamic world carpets were generally intended for the floor, but in Europe they had several other functions besides: as chest covers, as items of display hung from windowsills, and, notably, as luxurious tablecloths.<sup>61</sup> Here visual evidence is corroborated by contemporary inventories, which refer far more often to 'carpets for writing desks' and 'tables' than to 'carpets for floors'.<sup>62</sup> These various uses – which quite literally elevated the carpet from its position as a floor covering – reflected the high status given to rugs in the ornamentation of the Renaissance interior.

Among the most common imported varieties is a group commonly dubbed 'Lotto' carpets.<sup>63</sup> But Lorenzo Lotto was neither the first nor the only artist to represent such carpets: from the beginning of the sixteenth century to the middle of the seventeenth there are at least a hundred depictions,<sup>64</sup> suggesting a lengthy period of popularity peaking in



21.8 (*right*) Lotto carpet,  
western Turkey (probably  
Ushak), 16th–17th century  
(cat.137)

21.9 (*far right*) Lotto carpet,  
hand-knotted woollen pile  
on a woollen warp and weft,  
western Turkey (probably  
Ushak), probably 1500–1550  
(V&A: 904–1897)



the second quarter of the sixteenth century.<sup>65</sup> In technique and appearance these woollen carpets are unmistakably Turkish, and there is general agreement that most if not all were made in and around the west Anatolian town of Ushak, whence they could be exported through Izmir on the Aegean coast.<sup>66</sup> Like most other categories of Turkish carpet, the Lotto carpets are strikingly conservative in design: the main fields seldom vary much, and it is apparent that the weavers used cartoons from which to repeat patterns.<sup>67</sup>

Two of the three Lotto carpets in the V&A (plates 21.8 and 21.9) are known to have been purchased in Italy, while the third is also probably of Italian provenance.<sup>68</sup> Typically, they have main fields decorated with variants of the same design, based essentially on the alternation of staggered rows of hexagonal and cross-shaped forms. Also standard is yellow on a red ground, with blue used sparingly as an accent colour.<sup>69</sup> Greater variation occurs in the decorative borders, as these three examples demonstrate. Two are

edged with interlace ultimately derived from Kufic, an early Arabic script, indicating that they probably date from the first half of the sixteenth century, while the stylized foliate meander of the border of the third points to a slightly later date.<sup>70</sup> Geometric patterns were also common to other kinds of Turkish carpet, in particular the 'Small Pattern Holbeins', which characteristically have a pattern of small octagons alternating with crosses, both surrounded by angular interlacing ornament. Named after Hans Holbein, who depicted this type in his paintings, they appear a half-century or so before the Lottos, which are commonly presumed to be a later variant.<sup>71</sup>

European buyers appear to have been generally happy with stock products,<sup>72</sup> but there are cases of works being customized for the European market, often in response to individual commissions. For example, a letter to Lorenzo de' Medici about a table carpet, dated 28 March 1473, and the 1492 list of carpets that he owned, provide evidence of Medici commissions.<sup>73</sup> Adaptations of this nature seem to



have occurred more commonly in another group of carpets, extensively imported to Italy. Most are of wool and are distinguished by colouring, technical characteristics, and superlative quality. They share a limited but rich palette, consisting primarily of deep red, blue and green.

There are two contrasting styles within this category, the first characterized by the use of kaleidoscopic geometric designs.<sup>74</sup> Some of these have Mamluk blazons,<sup>75</sup> but their place of production remains a subject of controversy. Because Italian inventories up to the sixteenth century mainly distinguish between carpets from Turkey and carpets from Damascus,<sup>76</sup> it was once thought that they were produced in Damascus, but there is hardly any supporting evidence.<sup>77</sup> Cairo, however, is documented as a site of carpet manufacture from as early as the fourteenth century, and most scholars now agree on this city as the source.<sup>78</sup>

Technically indistinguishable from the first, the second type follows the quite different Ottoman floral tradition. It is largely agreed that these carpets

were also produced in Cairo, the shift in style being the result of the conquest of Egypt by the Ottomans in 1517.<sup>79</sup> Supporting this view is the discovery in 1983 of two grand carpets in the storeroom of the Pitti Palace, one in the geometric Mamluk style, the other in the Ottoman floral mode, but both described in Medici inventories as 'Cairino' carpets.<sup>80</sup>

A remarkable cruciform carpet, woven in a single piece, can also be assigned to Ottoman Cairo (plate 21.10).<sup>81</sup> Decoratively, its surface is divided by bands into a large central square from which emanate four rectangular flaps. The main elements of the design stand out in yellow, while the secondary motifs are in more muted shades of green and blue; the ground is a rich red. Stylistically Ottoman, its decoration draws on the vocabulary of Iznik pottery and tile work of the second half of the sixteenth century, to which period it can accordingly be attributed. Furthermore, its ornamentation resembles that of another, rectangular example in the Bardini Collection, which is also thought to have been produced in Ottoman Cairo.<sup>82</sup>

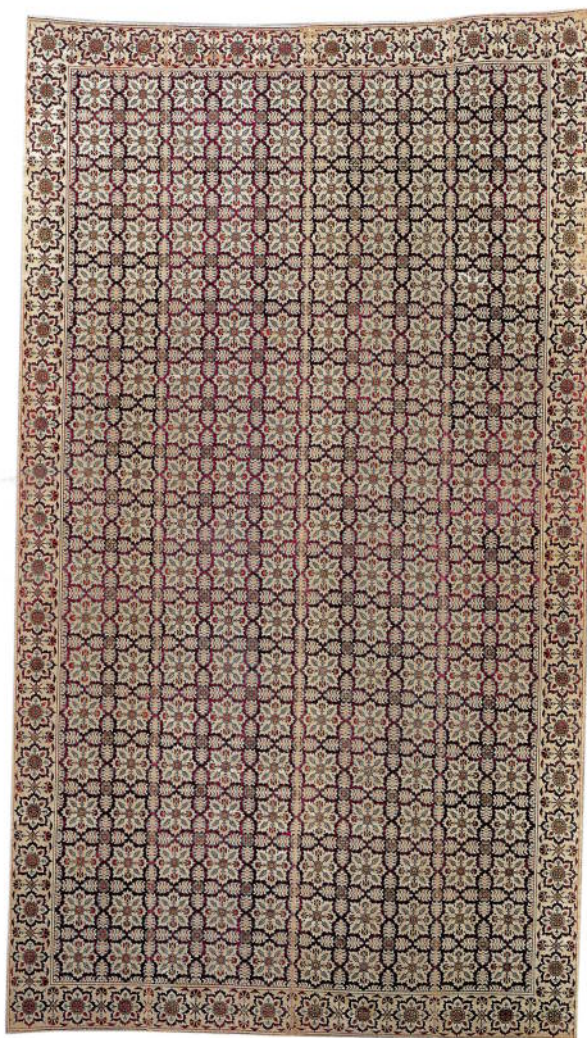
21.10 Table carpet, probably  
Cairo, mid-16th century  
(cat.233)





The makers of these carpets were aware of European taste and adapted their output accordingly.<sup>83</sup> Although the V&A carpet was thought to have been a canopy for use in processions when it was bought in 1883, its cruciform shape – known also from another example in San Gimignano<sup>84</sup> and a fragment in Berlin,<sup>85</sup> both likewise Cairene – indicates that it was intended as a cover for a small square table, a use quite alien to the Islamic world but common in the West.<sup>86</sup> It was with the same purpose in mind that the Cairene ateliers also produced square and circular rugs.<sup>87</sup> With its Cairene technique, Turkish ornamentation and European purpose, the cruciform carpet represents a striking convergence of cultural forces, demonstrating the thirst of Europeans for Eastern carpets and the eagerness of Islamic craftsmen to supply their needs.

21.11 *Nihale* (floor covering), cut and voided velvet, compound satin and velvet, Turkey, late 16th or early 17th century (Detroit Institute of Art, 48.137)



## FABRICS

Islamic woven silk fabrics, too, were traded westwards, although with a far more limited impact. Ottoman Turkey, once again, was the main source,<sup>88</sup> production being centred on the west Anatolian town of Bursa, which was also an entrepôt for raw silk from Iran.<sup>89</sup> Italian merchants traded there throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, purchasing raw silk for the thriving Italian weaving industries, particularly in Venice, Florence and Genoa.<sup>90</sup> Because of the increasing output of these local manufactories, demand in Italy for worked silk from the Middle East dwindled.<sup>91</sup> Thus although Ottoman fabrics were exported in large numbers to Eastern Europe and Russia,<sup>92</sup> comparatively few came to Italy, while Italy itself was a major supplier of silk fabrics to the Ottoman court and upper strata.<sup>93</sup> Many of these Italian fabrics had a distinctly Western appearance, but there was frequent reliance on Ottoman models, even down to loom width. These imitative textiles were once thought to indicate the popularity of Ottoman fabrics in Italy, but it is now agreed that they were made chiefly for export to Turkey rather than for domestic consumption.<sup>94</sup> A wonderful example is a sixteenth-century velvet in the Bargello Museum which, although Ottoman in style, seems to have been produced in Italy, possibly Venice.<sup>95</sup>

In a further twist, Ottoman weavers began making copies and adaptations of fashionable Italian fabrics.<sup>96</sup> It was the great demand in Turkey for Italian patterned silk velvets that probably prompted the establishment of velvet-weaving looms in Bursa about the middle of the fifteenth century, and in Istanbul a century later.<sup>97</sup> Some of the pieces they produced are so close to their Italian counterparts as to be stylistically indistinguishable, and only on technical grounds can they be tentatively identified as Turkish.<sup>98</sup>

If not of quite the same standard as their Italian counterparts, which were twice as expensive on the Ottoman market,<sup>99</sup> the Bursa and Istanbul velvets – or *kadife* – were of fine quality and much admired. The industry quickly developed its own characteristic style and excelled in the production of *çatma*: velvets brocaded with silver or gold thread.<sup>100</sup> Although few were imported, these Ottoman velvets were also esteemed in Italy. One famous example is



the floor covering (*nihale*) produced in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century that was for many years a prized element in the furnishing of the Villa Doria Pamphilj, Rome (plate 21.11).<sup>101</sup> It is known that Ottoman fabric traders were allowed to settle in Venice<sup>102</sup> and that Italian merchants imported Turkish silks.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, the influx of Levantine brocades was substantial enough to cause the Venetian Signoria to place embargoes on their importation.<sup>104</sup>

As well as floor coverings, such fabrics would have been used for the tailoring of costumes and for upholstery, their main functions in Turkey.<sup>105</sup> In 1501 Giovanni Maringhi, resident in the Istanbul mercantile quarter of Pera, reported to his patron in Florence that he had ordered in Bursa four dress lengths of a kind that he had previously sent,<sup>106</sup> indicating a sustained interest in such materials.

#### GILDED LEATHER SHIELDS

The decorative patterns of the three shields in plates 21.12, 21.13 and 21.14 are extremely close to the Turkish style. Indeed, if one did not know that Islamic shields use different materials, have a different shape and are not normally dressed in leather, it would be difficult at first glance to recognize that they are European imitations produced in Venice.<sup>107</sup> They belong to a collection of twenty-three gilded leather shields (oval and convex) and bucklers (small round shields with a buckle, i.e. a central conical, metallic point) in the armoury of the Palazzo Ducale in Venice. Similar pieces are held in various museums and private collections all over the world, some bearing the coats of arms of aristocratic Venetian families. A particularly important set comprising twenty shields was ordered from Venice by Wolf Dietrich von Raitenau, the Archbishop of Salzburg from 1587 to 1611, for his horsemen,<sup>108</sup> and as the three shown here are virtually identical to them in decoration and technique, it is likely that they are contemporary, a dating further supported by similarities to Islamic examples of the period.

They were produced by the technique used for wall hangings made of gilded leather, called *cuoridoro* (the Venetian dialectal equivalent of *cuoi d'oro*, golden leathers). During the sixteenth century there were over seventy *cuoridoro* workshops, but wall leathers went slowly out of fashion and by 1760 only seven

remained.<sup>109</sup> Trade patterns were complex, with skins and gold coming from different oriental and Western regions, and the import of both crude and tanned leathers was one of the major expenses of the Venetian Republic.<sup>110</sup> But once decorated, the finished product might be re-exported: in 1569 an order was placed by Ibrahim Bey, who had been impressed by a previous batch of Venetian gilded leathers.<sup>111</sup>

The production process of the shields was quite complex. The base frame consisted of horizontally and vertically overlapping curved thin laths of wood. The thin leather mostly had a relief decoration, but sometimes the pattern was painted on a flat background. The skin was divided into six triangles so as to be easily stretched and stuck onto the round surface. A thin layer of glue was then applied, onto which the silver or the pure gold leaf was stuck, gold always being used on the central medallion. This and the lateral medallions were separately decorated pieces of leather glued over the leather background. The gold or silver leaf was subsequently coated with coloured transparent varnishes, mostly red, but also green and blue, which are brightened by the gold or the silver underneath. These varnishes, sometimes together with opaque tints, were laid on the empty spaces among the relief decorations, functioning as a multicoloured background. The relief design was underlined by various coloured tints (which unfortunately in most cases have disappeared), and contoured and highlighted freehand with liquid gold. The entire surface was then given a final thin preservative coat of colourless varnish. The same technique is adopted in a number of Venetian bookbindings, some of them in Islamic style, which clearly must have been produced in the same *cuoridoro* workshops.<sup>112</sup>

The pattern is usually of a central round medallion with twelve points, surrounded by a sunburst decoration of six oval medallions, repeated and interrupted on the border. The field has a multitude of interlaced scrolls, leaves and small flowers with five petals. There is an evident parallel with contemporary medallion carpets, as in the central decoration of the famous Ardabil carpet in the V&A, dated 1539.<sup>113</sup> A few shields have peony medallions, another decorative element commonly employed in the Islamic world. This appears on one of the three shields



(plate 21.12), which also shows another common motif in Islamic art: the so-called 'cloud pattern'. Again, this decoration is used in a way very similar to that found on Turkish and Persian carpets of the same period.

Apart from their splendid decoration, two of these shields show the initials and coat of arms of well-known Venetian families. One (plate 21.13) has a central medallion with St Mark's lion and the initials 'A C', making it very likely that it belonged to the Contarini family, owners of the pair of Veneto-Saracenic candlesticks (plate 21.3). The other (plate 21.14) has the coat of arms (with black lozenges) of the Foscari family, and the initials 'A F'. Both families were major powers within the republic's oligarchy, contributing also – significantly in the context of the shields – to its military endeavours. For example, the likely owner of the Foscari shield, Antonio Foscari (1570–1622), was *capitano da mar*, Venice's Admiral of the Fleet and, as such, an important figure in the struggle against the Ottomans.

21.12 Gilded leather shield, leather on a wooden frame with gold and silver leaf, coloured varnishes and liquid gold, Venice, 1550–1600 (Ameria del Palazzo Ducale, Venice, Inv.J20)



Both shields are fully worthy of such illustrious owners. The medallions are remarkable for their internal decoration in relief, obtained by punching the reverse of the skin. Little flowers are part of the decoration, and the background is covered by little gold dots grouped in threes, another typical Islamic decorative element, found in bookbindings and also in miniature paintings, where it is used to represent stars in the sky.

Only the most important and noble personages in the Venetian army possessed shields with their own coats of arms and even initials. These were objects of display rather than practical tools of warfare, paraded on special occasions and exhibited in the home as symbols of power. Indeed, an important feature of any patrician house in Venice was a display of weapons known as the *lanziera dell'arme*, which was put up on the walls of the *portego*, the palace's main public space. These displays, recorded in inventories, would typically comprise a fanlike configuration of spears, called a *restelliera*, arranged behind a central shield.<sup>114</sup> For example, an inventory of goods belonging to the Magnifico Michele Memo, compiled in 1573 soon after his death, lists a *lanziere dell'arme* the centrepiece of which was a gilded shield with a helmet decorated with the Memo arms.<sup>115</sup> Sometimes these displays might include items taken in battle: a late sixteenth-century inventory of the patrician De Lezze family, for instance, lists a Turkish bow among other such trophies (although it was kept in a *camera* on the upper floor rather than the *portego*).<sup>116</sup>

Despite their peculiarly Venetian character, these shields are a product of the taste for Turkish design in the decorative arts that was widespread in Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as demonstrated, for example, during the festivities organized for the entry of the future Philip II of Spain into Milan in 1548, when members of the local nobility dressed in Turkish garb to symbolize 'ancient heroes'.<sup>117</sup> The similarity of the shields' decoration to things Turkish is such that we can regard them as one of the best examples of ostentatious Western objects being produced in the 'Turkish manner', taking 'an exotic object as a prototype to be imitated'.<sup>118</sup>





21.13 Gilded leather shield,  
Venice, 1550–1600  
(cat.32)

The large central medallion of this shield depicts the Lion of St Mark, and beneath this are the initials 'A C', probably indicating that the shield belonged to a member of the Contarini family of Venice.

The range of objects that has been considered above bears testament, above all, to the vitality of trade and cultural contacts between Renaissance Italy and the Islamic world. Although imported to other parts of Europe, where they inspired further imitation, objects from the Near and Middle East enjoyed greatest favour and were most influential in Italy. As well as being the result of Italy's strong mercantile presence in the Middle East, this phenomenon reflected certain aesthetic and artistic commonalities between the cultures of Italy and Islam, as demonstrated most clearly in the case of textiles. Whether displayed as indicators of status or beautiful exotica, Middle-Eastern artefacts constituted an important element in the decoration and enrichment of the homes of wealthy Italians during the Renaissance.



21.14 Gilded leather shield  
with the arms of the  
Foscarini family of Venice,  
Venice, 1550–1600  
(cat.33)



# AT HOME IN RENAISSANCE ITALY

EDITED BY

MARTA AJMAR-WOLLHEIM

*and* FLORA DENNIS

SUMMARY CATALOGUE EDITED BY

ELIZABETH MILLER



First published by V&A Publications, 2006

V&A Publications

Victoria and Albert Museum

South Kensington

London SW7 2RL

Distributed in North America by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York

© The Board of Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum, 2006

The moral right of the authors has been asserted.

Hardback edition

ISBN-10 1 85177 488 2

ISBN-13 978 1 85177 488 3

Library of Congress Control Number 2006928678

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

2010 2009 2008 2007 2006

Paperback edition

ISBN-10 1 85177 489 0

ISBN-13 978 1 85177 489 0

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

2010 2009 2008 2007 2006

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without written permission of the publishers.

Every effort has been made to seek permission to reproduce those images whose copyright does not reside with the V&A, and we are grateful to the individuals and institutions who have assisted in this task. Any omissions are entirely unintentional, and the details should be addressed to V&A Publications.

Designed by Janet James after an original design by the late Harry Green

New V&A photography by Christine Smith, Mike Kitcatt and Pip Barnard of the V&A

Photographic Studio

Front jacket/cover illustration: Sofonisba Anguissola, *Sisters Playing Chess* (detail), (plate 15.14)

Back jacket/cover illustrations (clockwise from top left): dish from Deruta (plate 7.14); spinet (plate 16.4); wedding chest from Florence (jacket only), (plate 7.18); rock crystal rosary (plate 14.8)

Frontispiece: Part of an inkstand from Urbino (plate 7.2)

Printed in Italy



V&A Publications  
Victoria and Albert Museum  
South Kensington  
London SW7 2RL  
[www.vam.ac.uk](http://www.vam.ac.uk)

THE RESEARCH FOR THIS PROJECT WAS FUNDED BY



The Getty Foundation



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council