



1 Lampas-woven silk *qanat* panel, India, circa 1600–1620. 0.97 x 2.01 m (3' 2" x 6' 7"). The David Collection, 19/2011

2 *A Prince Visits a Holy Man* (detail), miniature pasted on an album leaf, India, circa 1610. The David Collection, 14/2016

# Figurative language

An exhibition at the David Collection in Copenhagen challenges the widely-held belief that in classical Islamic art it is strictly forbidden to create works that show human figures. Making a point about representation are an extraordinary Mughal *qanat* panel and several miniatures of textile interest



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Both the David Collection catalogue (*The Human Figure in Islamic Art—Holy Men, Princes, and Commoners* by Kjeld von Folsach and Joachim Meyer) and the related Copenhagen exhibition 'The Human Figure in Islamic Art' (24 November 2017–13 May 2018) deal with Islamic art to about 1850, with the emphasis on miniature painting in its various forms. The curators' aim is to 'shed light on Islam's relationship to figurative art in general, to deal with the depiction of the human figure from stylized ornament to symbol and generic representation and then to naturalistic portraits, to enumerate the different contexts

in which the miniature paintings are found, and to study some of the frames of reference with regard to culture, society, and motif that the paintings especially elucidate.'

Von Folsach goes on to explain that the Islamic view of figurative depictions has changed over time, and has varied in different geographic locations, in different social strata, and from person to person. Over the centuries countless human depictions have been created in the Islamic cultural sphere. This is, not surprisingly, especially the case in princely circles and in the levels of society that were influenced by them. Human figures appear in



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3 *The Dervish from Faryab Crosses the River on his Rug*, miniature from a copy of Sa'di's *Bustan* (The Flower Garden), Esfahan, Iran, ca. 1600–08. The David Collection, 11/2016

4 *At the Doctor's* (detail), miniature from a copy of *Kitab al-hashaish*, an Arabic translation of Dioscorides's *De Materia Medica*, Baghdad, Iraq, Rajab 621 AH (June–July 1224 CE). The David Collection, 4/1997

architecture, reliefs, paintings and decorative art. They have been made in almost all materials and techniques, and depictions range from highly stylised to naturalistic renditions.

The great majority of the works displayed in Copenhagen were commissioned by Muslims and made by Muslims, and are an expression of the rich and varied cultures and artistic traditions that have professed Islam over the ages. Superb portraits and miniature paintings predominate, with and without calligraphy, and there are also outstanding figurative ceramics and precious metalwork, as well as one extraordinary larger-than-life textile.

This Indian silk lampas *qanat* panel (1) was made for use in either a courtly tent or palace. It depicts a male musician, perhaps a dancer, playing cymbals. He stands in a niche and is dressed in a green loincloth (*dhoti*), has a sash (*patha*) around his waist and a shawl (*uttariya*) draped around his arms. His turban is typical of the kind worn in Mughal India at this time. It is one of just three such textiles known, one showing a Persian courtier, the other a female Indian harem guard. All three are rare relics of the magnificence of Mughal court culture.

Several of the paintings also have detail content that will resonate with those who have an interest in textiles. In *A Prince Visits a Holy Man* (2), painted in Mughal India at the start of the 17th century, each figure is depicted with

individuality, and the details seem realistic. The blue and white ceramics are known from the period, made in Iran and exported to India. The same is true of the fine textile, perhaps a Safavid silk velvet, from which the young prince's *gilet* was made. Resembling several known Safavid luxury textiles, the garment depicts two courtiers, a man and a woman, in a garden with animals and plants.

A miniature from a copy of Sa'di's *Bustan*, painted in Safavid Esfahan at the court of Shah Abbas I in the first years of the 17th century, illustrates an 'autobiographical' tale from the 13th-century writer's travels in North Africa. On a riverbank he met an impoverished old dervish from the city of Faryab. While Sa'di paid the boatman a dirham to cross the river, the dervish did not have the money and had to remain on shore. Out on the river, however, Sa'di heard laughter, and turning around he saw the old man following the boat on his kilim-like prayer rug, a demonstration of the power of faith (3).

Finally, a detail from *At the Doctor's*, an early 13th-century miniature painted in Baghdad to illustrate an Arabic translation of Dioscorides' *De Materia Medica*, shows a group of men in contemporary garments. The representations are Middle Eastern, although there are similarities to the Turkish-Mongol depictions on Persian ceramics and manuscripts of the day (4). ❖