

**Artifacts from the Aga Khan Digital Collection Highlights****Artifact 1: Tiles**

Accession Number: AKM583 and AKM584

Place: Iznik, Turkey

Dimensions: Each 25 x 24.5 cm

Date: 1560

Materials and Technique: Fritware, underglaze-painted

By the sixteenth century, mosques and palaces built under the Ottomans (1299–1923) had predominantly plain ashlar exteriors with a profusion of colours and patterns on the interior in the form of glazed tiles, carpets and textiles, painted ceilings, and monumental inscriptions. These tiles are part of a repeat-pattern composition, an example of which adorns the walls of the sixteenth-century Rüstem Pasha Mosque in Istanbul. Typical of tiles with repeat patterns, the underglaze-painted design would have been applied to the tile through the use of a stencil. The design itself is highly complex. It is an exquisite example of a floral spray around a central motif demonstrating the folding, rotation, and repetition of patterns that characterize Islamic art. The colours are also representative of the Ottoman taste with combinations of turquoise, cobalt-blue, white, and red.

**Artifact #2: Doors**

Accession Number: AKM707

Place: North Mazandaran,  
Iran

Dimensions: 189 x 106 cm

Date: 1487

Materials and Technique:  
Wood, carved

One of the finest examples of its kind, this object bears the characteristic features of Timurid carved wooden doors: deep, intricately carved floral designs inherited from the preceding Il-Khanid period and reminiscent of Chinese lacquer wares; geometric patterns formed by the tongue-and-groove technique; plaited borders; and panels inscribed with prayers and information about patrons, craftsmen, and dates of production. Mazandaran in northern Iran is known for its dense forests and sweetly scented khalanj wood and several examples of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century woodcarvings have been found in that region (Bronstein 1938, p. 2622). The doors share design elements with other doors from this period surviving in

public and private collections: a cenotaph in the Khalili Collection, signed by Shams al-Din Sari and dated 902 H/1496 CE (London 2001, pp. 218-19); and pairs of doors in the Art and History Trust Collection, Houston, (Soudavar 1992, p. 94, no. 34) and in the National Museum of Iran, Tehran, signed and dated 846 H/1442 CE (London 1976, p. 292, no. 458).



**Artifact #3: Leaf with Calligraphic Composition**

Accession Number: AKM538

Place: Turkey

Dimensions: 13.5 x 28 cm

Date: 19th century

Materials and Technique: Gold on chestnut leaf

The skill and artistic virtuosity required to create this exceptional decorative object reflect the importance given by Muslims to applying Qur'anic verses on a broad variety of objects as a constant reminder of their faith and its centrality to their lives. Here, a sweet chestnut leaf is inscribed with a Qur'anic verse from Surat al-Isra' ("The Night Journey," Q17:80), which reads: "And say, 'Lord grant me a good entrance and a goodly exit, and sustain me with Your power.'" The calligrapher composed the verse in the form of a boat with the letters forming passengers and oars, perhaps recalling the journey of life. To make this extraordinary leaf, the calligrapher wrote the inscription on the leaf and sealed the writing on both sides with a wax barrier. He then soaked the leaf in an alkaline solution just long enough to dissolve most of the vegetable matter, while leaving the skeleton and the inscription intact. Gold leaf was then applied to the leaf, adding shine, value, and a luxurious effect.

Source: <https://www.agakhanmuseum.org/collection/collection-highlights>



**Artifact #4: Candlestick  
("Sham'dan")**

Accession Number:

AKM613

Place: Iran

Dimensions: Height 37.9  
cm

Date: ca. 1560

Materials and Technique:  
Engraved brass

*I remember one night as  
my eyes wouldn't close I  
heard the butterfly tell  
the candle I am stricken  
with love, if I burn it is but  
right But you why do you  
weep, why burn yourself  
out?*

The above verse from a poem by the famous Iranian poet Sa'di (died 1291–92) is commonly found on candlesticks (sham'dans) of the Safavid period (1501–1722), including the upper band of the Aga Khan Museum candlestick shown here. The symbolic comparison between the mystic lover seeking the Divine and the moth

yearning for the flame finds a natural home decorating lighting devices. Also typical of candlesticks from the Safavid period is split-palmette design on a cross-hatched background, here in an overall pattern that seems to rise along the ridges of the body. The overall floral scroll is interrupted by a six-lobed cusped arch chevron, which seems hidden in the densely engraved foliage.



**Artifact #5:  
Standard ('Alam)**

Accession Number:

AKM620

Place: Central India

Dimensions:

AKM620

Date: 1600s

Materials and

Technique: Steel

This 'alam (standard), imposing in appearance and size, is one of the most sophisticated standards in the James Allan classification. This four-branched type, in the shape of successive almonds of increasing dimensions, with inscriptions on an extensive arabesque openwork background, is reportedly of Safavid Iranian origin, particularly from

Ispahan. In his study, Allan lists a few, only two of which are dated: one 1069 H/1658-59 CE and the other 1117 H/1705 CE. This 'alam could be from South India, from one of the Shia kingdoms of the Deccan which were established following the weakening of the Bahmanid dynasty (1347-1527 CE) between the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth century. Indeed, the detailed nature of the openworked metal, mixing arabesque and calligraphic designs, is an indication of the close links these kingdoms maintained with Shia Safavid Iran. Many artists, men of letters and religious personalities from the Iranian world settled in that part of India. Only an in-depth study of the different inscriptions on this standard, which seem to be in thuluth style could perhaps confirm the origin of this piece. Mark Zebrowski highlights certain features of the thuluth style which are particular to that region, as well as the absence of the nasta'liq, widely used in Safavid Iran, and some examples of which are known in

northern India. A standard identified by Allan blends these two writing styles. The 'alams are represented on a ceramic mosaic piece, dated 1611 CE, in the royal Shia tomb, the Badshahi 'ashurkhana, built between 1593 CE and 1596 CE by Muhammad Quli in Hyderabad. No standard of this type seems to have appeared during that period, so the standard presented here might date back to the second half of the seventeenth or beginning of the eighteenth century, like those mentioned by Allan. The commemoration of the martyrdom of Husayn, son of 'Ali, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, who died in the Battle of Karbala, on 10 Muharram 680 CE, was the major milestone for Shiism and brought about several important events. In the Deccan, since the end of the sixteenth century, during the month of Muharram, poems in honour of the Shia martyrs, the marsiyas, were recited in assemblies that met at specific venues, the 'ashurkhanas. This is where unused standards were also stored. During the processions, they were carried with a representation of Husayn's cenotaph, the tabut, as well as an image of Buraq, the white, winged mount of the Prophet, and a candelabrum of incense. At the end of the procession, the tabut was buried or immersed in a river, according to Hindu tradition where the image of the goddess Durga was thrown into a river.





**Artifact #6:  
Planispheric  
astrolabe**

Accession Number:

AKM611

Place: Spain (Historic  
al-Andalus),

Dimensions: 13.5 cm

Date: 1300s

Materials and

Technique: Bronze  
inlaid with silver

In the Iberian Peninsula of the fourteenth century, Muslim scientists worked together with Christian and Jewish counterparts to translate and transmit scientific knowledge to Europe. This astrolabe may have been made in Toledo, Spain, then a major centre of scientific translation. The inscriptions on the astrolabe bear the names of constellations in both

Arabic and Latin, with additional inscriptions in Arabic. Later, Hebrew was added to one of the plates. The plates inside the astrolabe include projections for different geographical latitudes and represent different phases of use, confirming that the practical life of this astrolabe extended beyond the place and time of its initial manufacture. One of the functions of the astrolabe in Muslim civilizations was to determine the direction toward Mecca (the qibla) and to establish the times of prayer.

**Artifact #7: Beggar's Bowl (Kashkul)**

Accession Number: AKM612

Place: Iran

Dimensions: Length 61 cm

Date: late 16th century

Materials and Technique: Engraved brass

This beautifully engraved beggar's bowl (kashkul) is a ceremonial object that would have had pride of place in a Sufi lodge (khanqah). Kashkuls were used by wandering mystics who renounced their worldly possessions and subsisted on collecting alms. The bowl's elongated form and its related symbolic function derived from the Pre-Islamic Iranian tradition's wine boat. The nasta'liq inscription below the rim contains allegorical Persian verses about the Prophet Muhammad, 'Ali, and the friends of God, generally referring to the Sufi mystics.





**Artifact #8: A Fight in the Bazaar-Folio 18v from a Kulliyat (Assembled Works) of Sa'di (d. 1292)**

Accession Number: AKM284

Place: Agra, India (Historic Hindustan)

Dimensions: 41.8 x 26.2 cm

Date: ca. 1604

Materials and Technique:  
paque watercolour, ink, and gold on paper

An agitated fruit seller is pulled into a fight by one of his customers while an incredulous crowd gathers around them to intervene or just to observe. The scene is set in an open space in front of shops housed beneath a whitewashed arcade near the city gate. The arcade's pointed arches and diamond-shaped spandrels are precisely drawn. The artist creates depth in the painting's composition through a clever placement of individuals and the articulation of buildings. The fruit seller is at the focal point of a perspective formed by the gesticulating onlookers, and further depth is provided by the three-dimensional representation of the arcades. This approach to space and architecture is typical of early

Mughul painting and is beautifully represented by the twenty-three full-page paintings of this manuscript in the Museum's collection.



**Artifact #9: Sea serpent swallows the royal fleet**

Accession Number:

AKM167

Place: Bijapur, Deccan,  
India

Dimensions: 39 x 23.5 cm

Date: 1670

Materials and Technique:  
Opaque watercolour, paper

A giant sea serpent constricts its gold coils around a royal fleet, its full mouth leaving no doubt as to its intentions toward the remaining vessels. As if the carnivorous serpent were not enough, the alternative is a scary sea filled with demon-headed fish, giant crabs, and turtles, as well as a mermaid and merman. Most of the sailors appear to pray with upturned hands for deliverance from this nightmare. The painting has been identified as an illustration from the *Gulshan-i 'Ishq* (Rose Garden of Love) a heroic epic written in Deccani Urdu by the court poet Nusrati for Sultan 'Ali II ibn Muhammad 'Adil Shahi (r. 1656-72 CE) (Falk 1985, p.

174). The 'Adil-Shahis were great patrons of the arts and ruled Deccani Bijapur as an independent Shia kingdom from 1489 CE until it became part of the Mughal Empire in 1689 CE. It has been suggested that this painting was produced for an aristocrat at the end of Sultan 'Ali's reign or during the reign of his successor, Sikandar 'Ali Shah (r. 1672-86 CE) (Welch and Welch 1982, p. 229). The theme of disaster at sea in this painting may be compared with similar episodes in the *Hamzanama* as part of the picaresque genre of adventure-romances, featuring heroes who travel through strange lands and meet with danger on land and sea.





**Artifact #10: The story of Haftvad and the worm, folio from Shahnameh of Shah Tahmasp**

Accession Number:

AKM164

Place: Tabriz, Iran

Dimensions: 47 x 31.8 cm

Date: 1540

Materials and Technique: Opaque watercolour, gold, ink, paper

In this tale the daughter of Haftvad is spinning cotton with her female friends one day outside the village and discovers a worm in her apple. She decides to keep the worm, regarding it as a lucky charm, and places it in her spindle case for safekeeping. She asserts that the worm will help her to spin greater quantities of cotton than she ever has before, and to her friends' amazement her boast is realized. With each day she spins greater quantities of cotton and

nurtures the worm by feeding it pieces of apple. When her father, Haftvad, learns of this, he takes the worm to be a good omen and over time it grows to fill a custom-made chest, and then a stone cistern. After five years, it is as large as an elephant and has to be housed in a fortress. As the worm grows, so do Haftvad's fortunes. When King Ardashir learns of this, he becomes jealous and suspicious and plots to kill the worm. Eventually, Ardashir succeeds in penetrating the fortress and kills the worm by pouring molten lead down its throat. The tale ends with the deaths of Haftvad and his sons, vanquished by Ardashir's army. This painting, one of a few signed works in the Shahnameh of Shah Tahmasp I, is among the last added to the book. A signature, reading "Dust Muhammad painted it" (savvarahu Dust Muhammad), combined with



written sources, identifies the artist as Dust Muhammad Musavvir or Dust-i Divana. Although the implications of the signature remain unclear — did he design the composition and/or execute the painting in whole or in part? — the painting is one of the strongest in Shah Tahmasp I's Shahnameh. The vignette of Haftvad's daughter spinning cotton at the lower left activates the pictorial narrative, but the remainder of the painting is conceived as evidence of Haftvad's good fortune. The village, an aggregate of many finely made buildings, bustles with the activities of daily life. A muezzin makes the call to prayer as two figures sit atop a building consulting books with the tools of a scribe set down beside them. Elsewhere in the village, figures transport bundles of wood gathered from the countryside and carry sacks of goods, while a butcher serves a customer. The painting is replete with many other details of the everyday and depicts the elements of its extra-urban landscape with equal depth and complexity.