Figurative Art | Human Representation

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Human representation in Islamic art occurred in different artistic media: mosaics, painting, and sculpture. Besides portraiture, the viewer is entertained by illustrative pictorial representations of various pastimes such as hunting, battle-scenes, dancing, music-making, poetry-reading, nude or half-clad women, games and acrobats, gift-bearing and scenes of working life. The precise ‘meaning’ of the imagery may be understood in different and sometimes even conflicting ways, often making the motivation for the subject matter unclear. Although most of the images may be generally interpreted as depictions of luxurious living; pleasures of the court and the symbolism of wealth and power, some of the visuals can be understood also as precise references to concrete historical or social events. Moreover, the details seen in some hunting scenes display scenes of a specifically local nature.

Name: Bas-relief in carved marble
Dynasty: Hegira 4th–5th centuries / AD 10th–11th centuries Fatimid–Zirid
Details: Bardo Museum
Tunis, Tunisia
Justification: An unusual marble low-relief from the Fatimid period (297–567 / 909–1171) which shows two figures, one probably a sovereign or military leader, and to his right a flautist.

Name: Human head
Dynasty: Hegira, mid-4th–mid-5th centuries / AD 10th–11th centuries Fatimid–Zirid
Details: Museum of Islamic Art
Raqqada, Kairouan, Tunisia
Justification: A plaster head belonging to an exceptional collection that was excavated at Sabra al-Mansuriyya.

Name: Bowl
Dynasty: About hegira 427–87/ AD 1035–94 Fatimid
Details: Victoria and Albert Museum
London, England, United Kingdom
Justification: A bowl decorated with the figure of a Christian priest of the Coptic (Egyptian) church; he carries a lamp or censor and beside him is a cypress tree or ankh (‘key of life’ cross), an ancient Egyptian hieroglyph adapted by the Copts for Christian use.
**Name:** Casket  
**Dynasty:** About hegira 390–410 / AD 1000–1020 Spanish Umayyad  
**Details:** Victoria and Albert Museum  
London, England, United Kingdom  
**Justification:** A casket that may have been used as a jewellery box by a member of the royal court. It consists of panels depicting pleasurable courtly pastimes.

**Name:** Lower part of a semi-naked female statue  
**Dynasty:** Hegira first half of the 2nd century / AD first half of the 8th century Umayyad  
**Details:** Jordan Archaeological Museum  
Amman, Jordan  
**Justification:** The lower part of a limestone semi-nude woman who holds a basket in her left hand.

**Name:** Fragment of a female statue from Mushatta  
**Dynasty:** Around hegira 125–6 / AD 743–4 Umayyad  
**Details:** Museum of Islamic Art at the Pergamon Museum  
Berlin, Germany  
**Justification:**

**Name:** Fresco panel: 'Group of Musicians'  
**Dynasty:** Hegira first third of the 2nd century / AD second half of the 8th century Umayyad  
**Details:** In situ at Qusayr 'Amra  
Amman, Jordan  
**Justification:** A fresco painting of a boy flautist from Qusayr 'Amra. The image is an iconic one, often seen at court during the Umayyad period (41–132 / 661–750).