

Figurative Art

Human figures, animals and birds are found on Islamic art and architecture from its earliest beginnings and appear continually across all media and in different periods and regions. Although not predominant in Islamic art, the figurative, in contrast to art of the Late Antiquity which preceded it, appears in a wide variety of forms (paintings, relief works, and sculptures in the round) and in a wide variety of media such as stone, mosaic, stucco, ivory, glass, ceramics, metal, wood, textiles, leather and paper. The figurative in Islamic art addressed a broad range of subject matter, from the religious (the Prophet's mystical journey from Mecca to Jerusalem (Isra') and His ascension to heaven (Mi'raj)), to the secular (courtly scenes of music-making, banqueting and hunting). Unlike Christian art, Islamic figurative art was not made to serve religious purposes. Although Islamic art seems to have minimised the significance of figurative visual symbols in its artistic vocabulary in fact, contrary to popular belief, there was no prohibition in the Qur'an against it. Representations of humans and animals were only prohibited in religious buildings, such as mosques. In its formative period, Islamic figurative art brought together the diverse influences and prototypes of, for example, the Classical, Late Antique, Byzantine, and Sassanian styles. Later, other artistic traditions were subsumed, such as those from Central Asia, India, China and Europe. This resulted in the rich syntheses of diverse traditions that once practiced became uniquely Islamic in character in spite of their dissimilar origins.



Large dish

Hegira 5th century / AD 11th century
Fatimid
Museum of Islamic Art
Cairo, Egypt



Tile with stork

Hegira 9th century / AD 15th century
Mamluk
Museum of Civilisations | Museum of Oriental Art "Giuseppe Tucci"
Rome, Italy