

Echoes of Paradise: the Garden and Flora in Islamic Art

Throughout the history of Islamic civilisation, the concept of the garden and the vegetation in it has had particular significance in Muslim thought: of course, this is partly due to the arid landscapes in which most Muslims live. Surrounded by forbidding deserts and assailed by hot climates, Muslims have always appreciated the soothing impact of flowing water, the occasional greenery of isolated oases or indeed the colourful vegetation of artificially created walled gardens, maintained with carefully calculated water technology. The pleasure gardens of rulers and the wealthy elite were a coveted luxury, but they had a spiritual dimension too, as they were often designed to echo the lush and refreshing vegetation of al-janna: Islamic Paradise. Many descriptions in the Qur'an and in Islamic literature elaborate on its layout, its flowers, plants and trees. Given this preoccupation of Muslim thought with paradisiacal visions, it is not surprising that the concept of the garden with its rich flora has always been a central theme in Muslim cultures and, indeed, in their arts. Throughout the Muslim world, from Spain to India, rulers and the elite invested in luxurious gardens at the heart of their palace complexes and as an integral part of ceremonial royal life. Indeed, the way royal gardens were used often reflected the paradisiacal realities described in the Qur'an. Many gardens even had names to highlight their paradisiacal symbolism. Both in architecture and in art the wondrous vegetation of Paradise is often alluded to. Mosques, madrasas and royal mausolea were regularly placed in a garden setting reminiscent of Paradise and artistically enhanced by references to luxurious flower gardens. In the decorative arts references can be found both to gardens as a whole and to individual plants and flowers, the latter often chosen – beyond their beauty or practical use – for their religious or poetic significance. When flowers are not depicted in naturalistic form, intricate arabesque designs formed by overall symmetrical patterns of undulating stalks and split-leaves or split-palmettes invited reflection of the cosmic process of creation and the Divine Unity that underlies the infinite diversity of the material world.



Dish

Hegira around 1009 / AD around 1600

Ottoman

Museum of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Antiquities (Medelhavsmuseet) Stockholm, Sweden



Prayer rug

Hegira 1217 / AD 1802

Ottoman

Burrell Collection, Glasgow Museums Glasgow, Scotland, United Kingdom