



Figure 1: The Dragon Phoenix Basin (second half 13th century, Mosul [Iraq]: hammered brass; Museum für Islamische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin Preußischer Kulturbesitz [SMBPK]).

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# Displaying Cross-Culturality: A Water Basin from Mosul in Berlin

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**Abstract** A water basin from Mosul in the Museum für Islamische Kunst Berlin functions as an example for the representation, display, and reading of cross-cultural objects in the museum. By reflecting on the presentation of the basin over time, former and current trends of exhibiting objects with cross-cultural historical backgrounds in the museum become obvious. Still being appreciated mainly for their beauty and craftsmanship, such objects oscillate between their perception as so-called masterpieces as well as their perception of being testimonies of mutuality in exchange in a broader context.

**Keywords** Cross-Culturality, Display, Masterpiece, Hybridity, Othering

The first object visitors to the Museum für Islamische Kunst in Berlin encounter is a late thirteenth-century water basin from Mosul. The basin is richly decorated<sup>1</sup> and exceptional in size—83 cm in diameter at a height of 21.5 cm—making it a real showpiece. Most likely produced during the reign of the Ilkhanids (1256–1353) for the purpose of ablution at dining tables, the brass basin has a flat bottom and a distinctive scallop-shaped edge, gently flaring outwards into twenty-four segments, each of which features a different pictorial subject. The interior is lavishly ornamented, while the exterior walls are plain. Hence, the decoration was enjoyed above all when the basin was in use. The main motif is the impressive image of a paired dragon and phoenix in the round medallion in the center. Four friezes showing various aspects of courtly life encircle this medallion and are followed by a poetic inscription on the outer rim that glorifies the unknown former owner, clearly a ruler. Trapezoidal, circular, and square-shaped illustrations alternate, with their arrangement relating to the shape of the bowl as a whole. One of the friezes is surrounded by a decorative ornamental interlace with Arabic characters. The spaces between the images are filled with all kinds of decorative patterns. These become increasingly smaller and detailed towards the edges (►Detail), while at the same time being less accurately outlined. Due to wear and tear, the basin is missing its former inlays in silver and gold. As a result, the individual illustrations cannot easily be differentiated, resulting in a slightly confusing and obscure overall picture. Besides fighting, hunting, or amusement scenes accompanied by geometric or fantastic motifs, one focus is the depiction of animals and animal combat. The choice of animals and their manner of representation clearly draw on East Asian models (Enderlein, 1973, 8–9), as evidenced also by the image of the paired dragon and phoenix symbolizing the Chinese imperial couple.

Today, the basin is prominently placed at the start of the visitor circuit of the Museum für Islamische Kunst. It is presented in a glass case, its interior surface facing the beholder. Strikingly, the most recent display also features a Chinese porcelain lidded box (Fig. 2) dating from the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). The small box with underglaze blue and overglaze enamel decor in the five-colour palette (*wucui*) is on loan from the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin and shows similar images of paired dragons and phoenixes. The display thus emphasizes the cross-cultural nature of the large brass piece and, as such, appears to be a prelude to the museum's vast array of exhibits that may be categorized as 'Islamic,' but in fact correspond with other cultural-geographical realms (and museum departments). The basin is presented not only for its aesthetic qualities, but also put into a wider cultural context. This reflects recent developments in the display and study of material culture (Bruhn, Juneja, and Werner 2012)—and might open interesting perspectives for display strategies in museums. Aiming to exemplarily elaborate this, this essay looks at the

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1 For a detailed description, see Sarre 1904; and Enderlein 1973.



Figure 2: A lidded box from China (Ming Dynasty, Wanli Era [1573–1619]; Jingdezhen: porcelain, painted with underglaze blue and overglaze enamel decor in the five-colour palette (*wucail*); on loan from the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin Preußischer Kulturbesitz [SMBPK]).

object's history,<sup>2</sup> including its various exhibition presentations and its role in publications.

The Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin acquired the basin in 1845 from an unknown art dealer. In 1906, it entered the collection of the newly founded Museum für Islamische Kunst. For the period from 1845 until 1906, we lack any information whether—and if, in what form—the basin was exhibited. Undoubtedly, Friedrich Sarre, the first director of the new museum, was responsible for the acquisition. The information we have for the period from 1906 / 1910 until 1992 is vague. Most likely, the focus during this entire period was on the object's aesthetic qualities, largely leaving aside its context. An article on the basin written by Sarre (1904) is a good example: The author's focus on the craftwork and emphasis on the size of the object and its most delicate inlays is reflective of the art historical *zeitgeist*. Not surprisingly, Sarre included the basin in his list of just eight objects for the major exhibition "Masterpieces of Muhammadan Art" he curated in Munich in 1910. This exhibition with its focus on a 'masterpiece' paradigm (► **Masterpiece**) was instrumental in elevating the piece from the level of applied art to that of "fine art" (Troelenberg 2010, 60). This approach remained valid for many decades and was still reflected in

2 Many thanks to the Museum für Islamische Kunst, especially to Ute Franke, Gisela Helmecke, Yelka Kant, and Miriam Kühn, for their help in gathering all the relevant information on the object's history and reception.

a 1973 article by Volkmar Enderlein, the head of the collection at the time, who finally provided provisional sketches of the basin's imagery, which were added to the information panel. After the collections and displays were reorganized in the winter of 1992, following Berlin's reunification, the basin was displayed in one of the exhibition halls of the museum, presented directly on the wall in an upright position facing the beholder. This was possible only because the object was mounted between two glass display cases that flanked it on either side, thereby protecting it. This mode of presentation offered an unobstructed view of the inner surface of the basin with its worn inlays. In 2001, it moved to the very center of the museum's entrance area and the mode of presentation changed once again. For safety and conservatory reasons, it was exhibited horizontally and placed inside a glass case, making it almost impossible to decipher the rich decoration. In 2009, brief labels and professionally drawn image outlines were added, though apparently not very well received by visitors as they felt overstrained, the museum acknowledges. During renovation work in the museum's entrance area in May 2017, the basin moved to the right wall and changed its position back to upright. Besides the usual museum labels in German and English, graphic renderings of some of the imagery, and the inscription with its translation, the current display features, for the first time, a text touching on the object's transcultural character. In combination with the related Chinese piece, this presentation improves visibility and emphasizes a more contextualized cross-cultural reading.

The current display draws attention to the basin's role as a document of an important and interesting period in Islamic history: the Mongol invasions. The Mongols, whose actual ethnogenesis remains open until today, were a Central Asian nomadic tribe with the largest cohesive land empire in history in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Kollmar-Paulenz 2011, 13). Not only did they conquer and unify China where they reigned as the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), they also occupied most of West Asia where they established themselves as the so-called Ilkhanids. Il-khan means 'smaller Khan' and refers to the subordination to the Great Khan in China (Yalman 2001). The reign of the Ilkhanids was characterized by the opportunity of secure trade. A boom in maritime goods exchange provided a tremendously fertile ground for cultural production and economic expansion. Along with the trade in mercantile goods, religious ideas, folk tales, and customs as well as imagery were transmitted orally, via manuscripts, or as illustrations on ceramics and metalwork (Yalman 2001). In their new role as rulers of a vast empire, the Mongols searched for a way to legitimize their power. They pursued a tentative policy of adaptation and acculturation (Johnson n.d.), notably resorting to Chinese motifs and imagery to shape their Imperial image, as Kadoi has pointed out (2009, 15). Initially, craftsmen and their customers were interested mostly in the imitation of Chinese technologies and materials, Kadoi adds, but over time a shift of interest to visual imagery can be observed (2009, 15). In the case

of our water basin, we see an object whose shape and design reflect standards that had been developed in the region before the Mongol invasions, but whose ornamentation obviously incorporates iconographic motifs and formulas typical of Chinese art (von Gladiß 2012, 95).

The study of Chinese motifs and visual imagery in the art of the Ilkhanids reveals that most objects took on truly hybrid forms (► **Hybridity**), showing the profound effects on local artistic production. In this sense, our basin demonstrates the high technical bronze art skills of workshops in and around Mosul, which were especially famous for a metal inlay technique called *tauschieren*. Using this very technique, they created an entirely new artistic vocabulary by including popular East Asian fortune symbols alongside Islamic courtly symbols in a magnificent basin such as this. Rather than serving to exoticize the objects, the introduction of such new imagery was proof of productive mutual interaction. Motifs were incorporated individually and carefully readapted to their new context in a way that still bore witness to their origins. As a result, the basin reveals a tremendous richness of imagination and establishes a fascinating visual interplay between traditional Mosul bronze art and Chinese iconography, reflecting the Ilkhanids' highly cross-cultural lifestyle. The seemingly natural way in which the imagery was integrated additionally emphasizes the fruitful intermingling—a sound and smart combination making for a productive hybridity. In this regard, the basin may be seen as evidence of the establishment of a new Imperial iconography derived from China, which helped Mongol rulers legitimize their political power in the territories they controlled.

The presentation of the basin over time in Berlin reflects former and current trends of exhibiting objects with cross-cultural historical backgrounds in the museum. For a long time, such objects were—and still are—appreciated mainly for their beauty and craftsmanship, that is as masterpieces (► **Canon**). This notion obviously has not become obsolete, as the museum label explains: “Technically, the basin, ascribed to workshops in Mosul, is also a masterpiece. The ornaments engraved in the brass and inlaid with silver and gold wire once shimmered brightly on the darker body.” However, this view is blended with the more recent tendency toward increased contextualization. Yet while the Chinese influence on Islamic art is mentioned, the cross-cultural context is not explained in greater detail: “Islamic art has adapted a variety of cultural influences since its formation. [...] Paper, porcelain and silk came from China, while the Islamic world was known for metalwork and glassware. Chinese motifs, among them dragon and phoenix, found their way into the figurative canon of Islamic art in the wake of Mongol conquests in the thirteenth century.” Here, the aim of focusing on a cross-cultural reading of the object would have gained from putting greater emphasis on reciprocity and pointing more explicitly to mutuality in the exchange. This is also in line with the current call for a greater focus on embedding ‘non-European’ art objects—a widely used, but quite questionable term—in so-called contact zones and networks of

connectivity, in order to avoid *othering* (► **Othering**) and thus move towards a truly global art history (Bruhn, Juneja, and Werner 2012).

The information panel further reads: "Models for the transfer of motifs into Islamic art possibly were objects such as this box with the 'five color' design from a later period. In Chinese culture the dragon and phoenix symbolize the royal couple and were seen as a fortunate omen—did they convey the same message in Islamic art?" The last sentence leaves room for varying interpretations. It could be understood as one of the rare examples where a museum encourages its visitors to think for themselves. But the statement may also make visitors feel left to their own devices. And other factors may add to their possible confusion. Firstly, the porcelain box is dated later than the basin, which seems rather odd, considering that the box is used to demonstrate the model function of Chinese imagery for Islamic art. Secondly, the issue is not really taken up in the subsequent visitor circuit, thus withholding opportunities for visitors to come up with an answer. If it is, in fact, the museum's intention to encourage visitors to think for themselves, it needs to provide further information. Otherwise, the museum should not be surprised if asked what it intends to achieve with this comparison, if not a better understanding of the objects shown.

Current developments represent a good start in approaching cross-cultural objects in the museum by widening the focus from a mere presentation as masterpieces to a broader context. In this sense, the inter-departmental cooperation between the Museum für Islamische Kunst and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst points to a welcome trend in reinforcing the cross-cultural reading of museum objects. A meaningful comparison should lead to greater insight, as dictated by the very mission of museums, which is an educational, if not an epistemological one.

## Figures

Fig. 1: © Museum für Islamische Kunst – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Photo: Johannes Kramer.

Fig. 2: © Museum für Asiatische Kunst – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Photo: Maja Bolle.

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