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PEARLS ON A STRING: ARTISTS, PATRONS, AND POETS AT THE GREAT ISLAMIC COURTS

Asian Art Museum presents striking works from three influential Islamic empires, highlighting the people and relationships behind the art

SAN FRANCISCO, January 22, 2016 — At the cosmopolitan Islamic courts of the 16th through 18th centuries, a global exchange of people, ideas and technologies created fresh opportunities for innovation. From Feb. 26–May 8, 2016, the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco will present *Pearls on a String: Artists, Patrons, and Poets at the Great Islamic Courts*, an exhibition telling the personal stories of three creative individuals: a writer, painter, and patron. Through the written

word, painted image, and ingeniously engineered object, these men explored new ideas and perspectives — making a lasting impact on the cultural legacies of their empires.

Pearls on a String is one of a trio of special exhibitions kicking off the museum's 50th anniversary year. The exhibition, says museum director and CEO Jay Xu, embodies the goal that motivated the museum's creation back in 1966 and still guides it today: to serve as a "bridge to understanding" between East and West.

"The Asian Art Museum showcases art that emphasizes connections across time and place," Xu says. "*Pearls on a String* does just that, by focusing on talented individuals and their professional networks: artists and intellectuals from varied backgrounds who together shaped the worlds they lived in and left a mark through their works."

Through 64 exquisite artworks, including an eye-catching bejeweled rifle, the exhibition introduces three fascinating and influential figures: the 16th-century writer Abu'l Fazl in Fatehpur Sikri, the 17th-century painter Muhammad Zaman in Isfahan, and the 18th-century patron Sultan Mahmud I in Istanbul.

"By providing a rare glimpse of the worlds these individuals inhabited, including the social connections that ignited their creativity, *Pearls on a String* highlights the importance of both individual initiative and human relationships in creating masterful works of art," says exhibition curator Qamar Adamjee, associate curator of South Asian and Islamic art.

Pearls on a String is organized into three vignettes, each delving into the careers of one of the protagonists and the society in which he lived.

Portrait of Mahmud I, from A Series of Portraits of the Emperors of Turkey, 1815, engraved by John Young (English, 1755–1825). Mezzotint. National Gallery of Art Library, Washington, D.C., gift of Mr. Ferdinand Lammot Belin, N7614.T9 Y6. Photograph courtesy National Gallery of Art Library, Washington, D.C.

Section 1: The Writer | Abu'l Fazl at the Mughal Court



Entering the exhibition, you'll first get to know writer and historian Abu'l Fazl ibn Mubarak (1551–1602). Abu'l Fazl witnessed and recorded events both intimate and momentous at the court of Emperor Akbar in 16th-century Mughal India (present-day Pakistan and India). Through Abu'l Fazl's words, the legacy of this emperor's influential reign has been preserved for posterity.

From the age of 23 until his death at 51, Abu'l Fazl served the emperor as advisor, chief secretary, ambassador, court historian, translator and trusted friend. His intellectual vigor, humanitarian values and liberal religious sentiments resonated with Akbar, whose court was a multicultural community that engaged with a variety of religious, artistic, and intellectual traditions.

Perhaps Abu'l Fazl's most celebrated work is the three-volume *Akbarnama* (History of Akbar), a comprehensive biography of the emperor that captures his achievements, milestone events and court interactions — and remains a key resource today. Artists translated this account of Akbar's life into some of the most distinctive manuscript paintings from this period. The *Akbarnama* and other illustrated works composed by Abu'l Fazl's peers included in this exhibition reflect the imperial vision of an integrated empire that combined Central Asian and Islamic traditions with India's Hindu and Jain cultures.

Section 2: The Painter | Muhammad Zaman at the Safavid Court



Next, you'll meet the painter Muhammad Zaman ibn Haji Yusuf (active 1670–1700), who dramatically innovated 17th-century Persian painting at the Safavid court of Shah Sulayman (ruled 1666–94) in Isfahan, Iran.

Zaman is recognized as the pioneer of *farangi-sazi* (European style), which merged Persian artistic traditions with European iconography and painting techniques. His hybrid style was used to reinterpret some of the greatest stories of Persian poetry, shining a new light on classical literature.

As you'll discover in *Pearls on a String*, this blending of European and Persian styles of painting was inspired by the increasing diversity of the capital city, Isfahan. During the 17th century, Western artists, adventurers, and merchants traveled to this cosmopolitan center, with its population of Persian and Central Asian Muslims, Georgians, Armenians, Circassians, Jews, and Zoroastrians. In this international context, Zaman's interpretations of western art became exciting and meaningful to his contemporaries.

Section 3: The Patron | Sultan Mahmud at the Ottoman Court

The final figure you'll encounter is Sultan Mahmud I (ruled 1730–54), who was celebrated in his day both as a sponsor of the arts and as a ruler who brought peace to the Ottoman Empire. *Pearls on a String* explores collaborations among Mahmud, his craftsmen, and merchants at the cosmopolitan royal court in Istanbul, the empire's capital, poised at the crossroads of Asia and Europe.

(Top) Abu'l Fazl presenting the *Akbarnama* to Akbar, from the *Akbarnama* (Book of Akbar), approx. 1600–1603, attributed to Govardhan (Indian). Opaque watercolors, ink, and gold on paper. Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, In 03.176b.

Photograph © The Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library, www.cbl.ie.

(Bottom) Turktazi's Visit to the Magical Garden of Turktaz, Queen of the Fairies, from the *Khamisa* (Quintet) of Nizami, 1675–1676, by Muhammad Zaman (Iranian). Opaque watercolors, ink, and gold on paper. The British Library, London, Or. 2265, fol. 221v. Photograph © The British Library Board.

Mahmud — a stout, hunchbacked man without experience in imperial affairs — had many challenges to overcome upon gaining the throne. As a boy in 1703, he witnessed his father's humiliating removal from office by his uncle Ahmed III (ruled 1703–30). Then in 1730, a revolt broke out against Ahmed, and Mahmud was appointed ruler of a vast and unstable empire. Those who put him on the throne thought they could control him, but Mahmud proved them wrong. He was able to calm public unrest and initiate military reforms.



Using art and architectural patronage, Mahmud underscored his royal lineage and communicated his vision of a technologically advanced empire engaged with Europe. Mahmud was personally involved in commissions and appreciated cleverly engineered objects constructed of rare materials. One of the most remarkable pieces on display in *Pearls on a String* is a jeweled gun commissioned by Mahmud, which contains a curious assemblage of objects: a gold dagger, a pen case with writing instruments and other accessories, all lavishly encrusted in diamonds, rubies, and emeralds.

EXHIBITION ORGANIZATION

Pearls on a String: Artists, Patrons, and Poets at the Great Islamic Courts is organized by the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, in partnership with the Asian Art Museum. This exhibition has been made possible in part by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities: Exploring the human endeavor; a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services; and an award from the National Endowment for the Arts. Presentation at the Asian Art Museum is made possible with the generous support of The Akiko Yamazaki and Jerry Yang Fund for Excellence in Exhibitions and Presentations, Anne and Timothy Kahn, and Judy Wilbur. This exhibition is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Art and the Humanities.

PUBLICATION

A catalogue accompanies *Pearls on a String*, published by The Walters Art Museum and University of Washington Press (hardcover, \$60; 260 pages). Available at the Asian Art Museum store: 415.591.3600, shop@asianart.org or store.asianart.org.

ABOUT THE ASIAN ART MUSEUM

The Asian Art Museum—Chong-Moon Lee Center for Asian Art and Culture is one of San Francisco's premier arts institutions and home to a world-renowned collection of more than 18,000 Asian art treasures spanning 6,000 years of history. Through rich art experiences, centered on historic and contemporary artworks, the Asian Art Museum unlocks the past for visitors, bringing it to life while serving as a catalyst for new art, new creativity and new thinking.

Information: 415.581.3500 or www.asianart.org

Jeweled Gun of Sultan Mahmud I

Ottoman Turkey, dated AH 1145 (1732/33 CE)

Steel, wood (ash), gold, gilded silver, silver, nephrite, diamonds, emeralds (or beryls), rubies (or spinels); with a later miquelet lock, Russian Caucasus, dated AH 1278 (1861/62 CE)

51.84, The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, acquired by Henry Walters, 1903

MORE

Location: 200 Larkin Street, San Francisco, CA 94102

Hours: The museum is open Tuesdays through Sundays from 10 AM to 5 PM. Hours are extended on Thursdays until 9 PM starting Feb. 26 through Oct. 8. Closed Mondays, as well as New Year's Day, Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day.

Special Exhibition Admission: FREE for museum members and children (12 & under). On weekdays, \$20 for adults and \$15 for seniors (65 & over), youth (13–17) and college students (with ID). On weekends, \$30 for adults and \$25 for seniors (65 & over), youth (13–17) and college students (with ID). On Target First Free Sundays, admission is \$10.

General Admission: FREE for museum members, \$15 for adults, \$10 for seniors (65+), college students with ID, and youths (13–17). FREE for children under 12 and SFUSD students with ID. General admission on Thursdays after 5 PM is \$5 for all visitors (except those under 12, SFUSD students, and museum members, who are always admitted FREE). General admission is FREE to all on Target First Free Sundays (the first Sunday of every month).

Access: The Asian Art Museum is wheelchair accessible. For more information regarding access: 415.581.3598; TDD: 415.861.2035.

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