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Beyond Bake

‘My heart is pounding. I never dreamed I would get so close to these things; it is something truly special. The Lord is blessing me today.’

— Lena Alekuseiduranie (2026)

Dear visitors,

This exhibition has come to life because many people have contributed their knowledge and skills to the preparations. Take Lena Alekuseiduranie, for example. Together with fourteen others, she is an active member of our community advisory board, the Critical Friends. They have examined the original artworks, discussed their content and shared background knowledge with us – not only about the individual pieces, but also about the cultures from which they originate. To enable you to experience the works’ places of origin and their own memories through the senses, they have selected scents and helped to shape the exhibition programme and this space.

Prior to this, the artworks from our collection were examined by researchers. They assessed dates and places of origin, deciphered inscriptions and provided new descriptions of the objects. Where necessary, conservators cleaned the artworks, repaired damages and prepared the pieces for display. Wood, metal, fabric, ceramics, stucco – each material required its own specialist. Sometimes, they even had to develop new techniques.

To find out how the works came into our possession, more than 1,500 pages of archive material were analysed. A key partner in this endeavour was the Osthaus Museum in Hagen, which holds documents relating to the early history of the Folkwang. This type of research is known as provenance research. It helps to establish whether works of art came into our possession unlawfully. If we suspect this to be the case, you will find this symbol on the respective labels: ☒.

You can meet many of the people who have contributed to this exhibition – for example, in the video corner or at the events organised to accompany this exhibition. This room is intended to be a place for people to meet as well. How you use it – whether you want to find out more, get creative, pick up a game or simply relax – is entirely up to you. A very warm welcome!

Learn Python the Hard Way

Please Subscribe

‘Why not stick to your original idea and found an Oriental museum, which would be the only one of its kind, as there isn’t one yet?’

— Irene von Bary (1898)

When the young Karl Ernst Osthaus boards the train heading south from his hometown of Hagen in the spring of 1898, he cannot know that this journey will change his life forever. His destination is North Africa – Algeria and Tunisia. What begins as a scientific research expedition quickly develops into a journey of discovery into the artefacts and architecture of the Islamicate world. Fascinated by a culture entirely new to him, he forgets the actual purpose of his journey. In the ruins of Carthage, he encounters Roman antiquity; in the streets of Tunis, the Islamic Middle Ages. As with so many Europeans before him, his enthusiasm leads to his first purchases of Islamic art, carpets and fabrics, ceramics and metalwork, weapons and coins. The German consul’s sister, Irene von Bary, helps him to acquire a dagger in Tunis, among other things. Osthaus buys fabrics and garments in the *souks* and has them sent home. Filled with new impressions, Osthaus returns to Hagen and toys with the idea of dedicating his museum, which is then in the process of being established, entirely to ‘Oriental’ art.

Just half a year later, he embarks on his second journey, this time to the heart of the Islamicate world. Travelling via Hungary and Romania, Osthaus journeys to the Ottoman Empire and the territories it once encompassed: to Greece, Türkiye, Syria, through Lebanon and on to Egypt. Here, he witnesses the vibrant continuation of the architectural traditions of past empires and the architectural innovations of the Islamicate world. Once again, he meets other Europeans who share his enthusiasm and with whom he remains connected for years. Through them and with them, he expands his collection. This marks the definitive beginning of his life as a collector. Back in Hagen, following an initial presentation of the new acquisitions at the General Assembly of the Natural History Society, tiles and bowls, vases and plates, textiles and carpets all await, with eager anticipation, the completion of the building on Hochstraße and the founding of the Museum Folkwang.

‘Poems by the Persian poet Firdusi in a richly decorated manuscript, interspersed with numerous illustrated pages, bring the colourful, fairy-tale-like fantasy of One Thousand and One Nights back to life before our eyes.’

— Essener Allgemeine Zeitung (1922)

The acquisitions that Karl Ernst Osthaus makes on his second journey to the Ottoman Empire, with the assistance of intermediaries, bear witness to a shift in his collecting activities. He now turns his attention to exquisite one-of-a-kind pieces and acquires two works that are considered to be among the most important examples of Islamic art in Germany today. These include a precious illuminated copy of the *Shāhnāma* (Book of Kings). The high artistic quality of the manuscript and its seventy-two illustrations suggests that it was produced for the Safavid royal house under Shāh ‘Abbās I.

The epic poem written by Abū ’l-Qāsim al-Firdausī (940–1019/25) remains to this day one of the most significant literary works in the Persian-speaking world. Firdausī spent over thirty years working on its 50,000 verses, in which he intertwines centuries-old myths and legends with historical events. Various ruling dynasties facilitate the production of elaborately decorated copies of the *Shāhnāma* at their courts, in order to associate themselves with the ideals of power, virtue and humility conveyed within it. Due to the many different historical contexts, no two copies of the *Shāhnāma* are alike. For example, the copy acquired by Osthaus contains sections from another epic tale dedicated to the mythical King Garshāsp. He is regarded as the ancestor of Rustam, the most famous hero in the *Shāhnāma*.

From the very beginning, the *Shāhnāma* is considered a highly valuable treasure at the Museum Folkwang. As a key work of art that defines the identity of the collection of Islamic art, it is regularly displayed in the permanent exhibition since the museum’s opening and is repeatedly highlighted in publications until the collections are taken over by the City of Essen. Following the death of Karl Ernst Osthaus, the manuscript remains in the family’s possession and is acquired by the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin in 1938. A prior offer made by the heirs to the museum in Essen had been rejected.

Hyaena

Bonamassa House ...

Probabilistic ...

Dominoes ...

Yaba

‘I believe craft holds many answers to our fast-paced world.’ — Dana Awartani (2026)

Karl Ernst Osthaus’s second journey takes him to Damascus in the autumn of 1898. The millennia-old city, shaped by trade, is at this time a cultural and economic centre within the Ottoman Empire. With the help of the German consul, Ernst Lütticke, and his business partner, Bishāra Asfar, Osthaus visits its historic townhouses, whose magnificent reception rooms make a lasting impression on him. While he is still there, he begins looking for an interior for his collection but is only able to acquire a set of wooden wall and ceiling panelling a few weeks after his return home. The elaborately decorated interior is designed with the comfort of guests in mind. Its design bears witness to a variety of cultural influences: the patterns are reminiscent of Egyptian carpets, Iranian silk fabrics and Ottoman brocade embroidery. A section of the timberwork on display here gives an impression of the artful craftsmanship involved. Surprisingly, the so-called Damascus Room is never installed at the Museum Folkwang but instead packed up in separate pieces and stored until it is donated to the Museum für Völkerkunde in Dresden in 1930. This long period of storage has contributed to the fact that the work is now one of the few of its kind to have been preserved in its entirety and without alteration. The entire Damascus Room has been on display at the Japanisches Palais in Dresden since 2022. Its history illustrates the impact that transferring a work of art to a new context – particularly a museum setting – can have.

Exploring the connection between cultural loss, craft practices and artistic tradition in the Islamicate world shapes the work of the Palestinian-Saudi artist Dana Awartani. Through her textile work, she engages with a medium that presents a focal point of the Museum Folkwang’s collection. In doing so, her perspective broadens a Eurocentric view by introducing a contemporary female voice. In her work, *Come, Let Me Heal Your Wounds. Let Me Mend Your Broken Bones* (2024), the artist translates the destruction of cultural sites in the Arab world into a textile cartography: to this end, she introduces tears into silk fabrics as traces of loss. Using the traditional technique of darning, she then rejoins the damaged areas – yet, like scars on the skin, they remain visible. In this way, the work speaks not only of loss, but above all of healing and preservation. This principle is also evident in Awartani’s focus on craftsmanship: natural pigments and materials are processed in a resource-efficient manner, with repair and preservation taking precedence over disposal.

DÜREN AUF

DOORS OPEN

1942 # & *

‘The Oriental department holds masterpieces of Arabic woodwork, bronze work, vessels, engraved and inlaid weapons, […] sixteenth-century Persian carpets [and] tiles.’ — Hagener Zeitung (1902)

In July 1902, the Museum Folkwang in Hagen opens its doors. Karl Ernst and Gertrud Osthaus have been working towards this for three years. Commissioned in 1898, the edifice is a work of art in its own right. While the façade is in the Neo-Renaissance style, the interior design by Henry van de Velde is modern. The ever-growing collection is integrated between the distinctive columns, which are perceived as ‘Moorish’. The exhibits from the Islamicate world are displayed in a section on the ground floor that extends onto the adjoining staircase.

Islamic textiles, which have piqued Osthaus’s interest from the very beginning, make their first major appearance. After the couple acquires new fabrics in Tunis in 1904, the Museum Folkwang displays the entire collection of textiles for the first time in a special exhibition. A particular focus is on printed cotton fabrics, from which the artist and architect Peter Behrens draws inspiration for his own designs.

Gradually, the collection grows. Persian pieces are added to the works from North Africa and the Ottoman Empire. Osthaus begins to buy more frequently in Europe and engages in exchanges with other collectors. In Paris in 1906, he acquires several pieces at an auction at Hôtel Drouot in Paris, including a plate with a grape motif from Iznik. A tile featuring quotations from the Qur’an passes from the holdings of the ceramics collector Guillermo Joaquín de Osma y Scull into the Museum Folkwang’s collection. Further objects are acquired through the Berlin antiquities dealer Ludwig Glenk.

The collection is characterised by its focus on textiles and ceramics. These two diverse sections include pieces from across the Islamicate world. Many of them are distinguished by abstract, non-figurative motifs. The shift towards two-dimensional ornamentation attracts artists such as Peter Behrens, who draw inspiration from the Folkwang collection for new designs. Consequently, the museum becomes an important meeting place for artists, with the Islamic art collection playing a key role.

Samanjasemma

Metamat

Bordbrun

Utskotsut 323

‘The past few days have once again been a genuine delight for me, and the Spanish Cellar transports me into romantic reverie.’ — Walter Gropius (1908)

In March 1908, Gertrud and Karl Ernst Osthaus set off on a trip to Spain together. From Madrid, their journey takes them to Andalusia – the region that was under Muslim rule in the Middle Ages. Gertrud Osthaus documents key stops along the way with her camera. Thanks to this, we know that the couple visits significant cultural sites of the Islamic world, including the Alhambra in Granada, the Mezquita in Córdoba and the Alcázar in Seville. Since the eighteenth century, these buildings and their elaborate décor attract travellers and scholars alike. They also leave a lasting impression on the Osthaus couple.

As a result of the journey, an extensive collection of Spanish tiles is established at the Museum Folkwang by 1911. The art historian Hans Wendland plays a key role in facilitating this endeavour. Walter Gropius, who later becomes director of the Staatliches Bauhaus, also assists with the acquisitions. He is in Spain to study ceramic techniques. Through both of them, contacts are established with important Spanish collectors.

The Folkwang collection grows rapidly as a result and clearly illustrates the influence of Islamic models on Spanish tile production. It comprises medieval Islamic tiles, as well as works from the period of Christian rule between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. A particular focus is on Seville as a centre of production.

The objects’ quality and excellent preservation, as well as the variety of patterns and its concept, make the collection one of the most important of its kind in the world even at that time. This leads to a lasting transformation of the Islamic department of the Museum Folkwang. As early as October 1908, the lower level becomes the ‘Spanish Cellar’; by 1911 at the latest, the entire collection of Islamic art is moved there. At this time, Karl Ernst Osthaus publishes his essay on *Spanish Tilework* in an academic journal. It is regarded as the first German-language study of the subject.

Beyond Bias

‘And then, as the eye became accustomed, as it immersed itself and began to comprehend these treasures, the eternal question in art, “How?” – as one sees the combination of such priceless dreams, the unification of the irreconcilable.’

— Wassily Kandinsky (1910)

The exhibition *Masterpieces of Muhammedan Art* is one of the largest and most important European exhibitions dedicated to the art of the Islamicate world. It takes place in 1910 on the Theresienhöhe in Munich. Spread across eighty rooms, over 3,500 objects are on display, provided by 260 museums and collectors from all over the world. The exhibition breaks with the romanticisation of the ‘Orient’ that prevails in Europe and places Islamic art on a par with European art. It also helps to establish the history of Islamic art as an independent academic discipline.

Karl Ernst Osthaus and the Museum Folkwang contribute to this major project. Although their participation is not confirmed until eight weeks before the opening, from May 1910 a total of 150 objects from Hagen are on display in seventeen rooms. Some of the finest pieces from the collection are selected. The *Shāhnāma* can be compared with other exceptional manuscripts, and the Iznik plate, dating to around 1570, is also displayed in good company. Two drawings from North India are made available to researchers in the ‘academic repository’, as is a group of textiles. The most valuable of these, a twelfth-century Egyptian fabric fragment, is illustrated in the catalogue. However, the Museum Folkwang’s greatest contribution is its collection of Iberian and Ibero-Islamic ceramics. Several rooms are dedicated to it. Tiles from Seville, Toledo, Valencia, Niebla and Granada allow visitors to appreciate the beauty of Spanish craftsmanship and introduce them to its history. Plates adorned with lustre decor sparkle under the exhibition lights, and the large vase from the Almohad period reveals its full splendour. Drawing on his experience as a curator, Osthaus arranges the rooms assigned to him according to his own vision. The black wooden frames that still hold many of the tile panels today are thought to stem from his concept.

The lasting impression the exhibition has on the specialist community does not carry over into the Museum Folkwang’s future direction. Although Osthaus now stands alongside the other major collectors of Islamic art of that era, his interests are more diverse. After 1910, a new chapter begins for him and the Museum Folkwang.

MANAMANAYA3AMNAGA

BLOODBLADE'S

BLOODY $$

‘Really large surfaces suit me so well.’

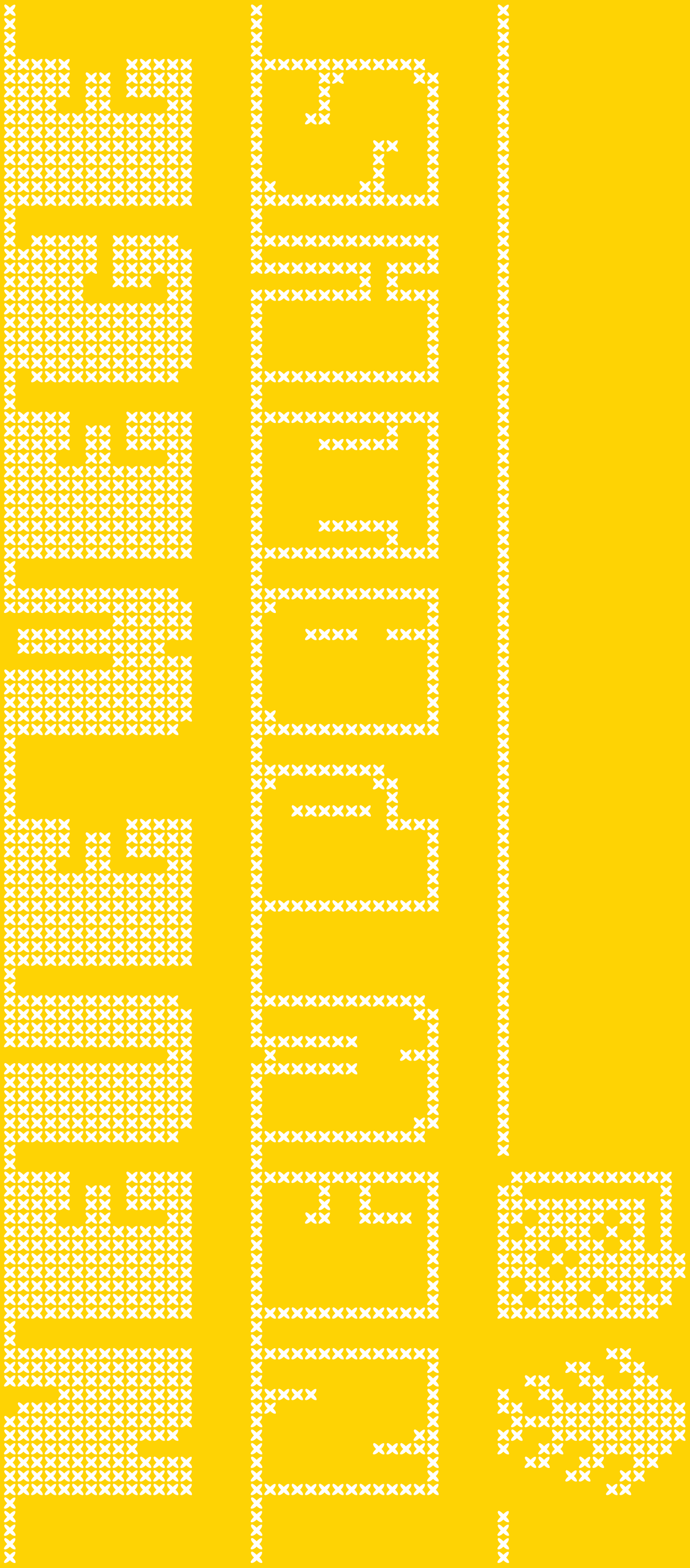
— Johan Thorn Prikker (1916)

In 1908, the Osthaus family moves from the Museum Folkwang to the newly completed Villa Hohenhof on the outskirts of the city, taking with them the aesthetic ideal developed through their previous work at the museum. The building is designed by Henry van de Velde as a Gesamtkunstwerk, in which architecture, the visual arts, applied arts and influences from various cultural backgrounds collectively shape everyday life. Many of the villa’s architectural elements echo Islamic models.

In 1911, Osthaus commissions the Dutch artist Johan Thorn Prikker to further decorate his private retreat and study. Osthaus has already encountered elaborate interior designs during his early travels. Following the purchase of the Damascus Room and the establishment of his collection of Spanish tiles, the gentlemen’s study also bears witness to his unwavering interest in the interplay between ornament and architecture. Thorn Prikker designs the room with an ornament that seems to envelop those present. Similar to the design principles of Islamic art, he works with so-called ‘rapports’: motifs composed of basic shapes, the repetition of which creates an infinite pattern. He paints these onto the plaster using stencils and matches the high-contrast tempera colours to van de Velde’s furnishings.

Thorn Prikker’s interest in repeatable, ornamental forms is evident from an early stage, as can be seen in a 1902 design for the wall decoration of a private house in Scheveningen. In the years that follow, he continues to develop his ornamental style across a wide range of media: from wall and ceiling paintings to fabric hangings and furniture upholstery, right through to mosaics. In 1913, he designs ornamental variations for Hagener Textilindustrie AG, which are transferred in various colour schemes onto cotton fabrics suitable for industrial printing. In doing so, he makes use of the technical possibilities of the industrial age. His rapport makes it possible to continue the ornament across the entire length of the fabric.

One of these fabrics is also used to bind an album from the Museum Folkwang. The album brings together photographs of objects from various provenances, thereby reflecting what is also evident in the gentlemen’s study at the Hohenhof, namely the ornament as a unifying element between the collection, architecture, applied arts and industrial production.



‘The outbreak of war prevented many endeavours from continuing. Organising exhibitions became more difficult. […] All that remained, then, was the power of the written word. A collection of slides had long since been assembled.’

— Karl Ernst Osthaus (1918)

Ever since Emperor Wilhelm II travelled from Constantinople (now Istanbul) to Damascus in 1898, the German Empire has been strengthening its ties with the Ottoman Empire. This is driven by economic and geopolitical interests. Following the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, the two states forge a military alliance. The Museum Folkwang uses the occasion for an exhibition: from December onwards, the entire museum is filled with Islamic art from its own holdings. To accompany the exhibition, Karl Ernst Osthaus, his assistant, Fritz Meyer-Schönbrunn, and the head of the textile collection, Agnes Greve, give slide lectures. Through the medium of photography, as well as in academic publications and lectures, the engagement with Islamic art takes on new forms.

At the same time, Osthaus is pressing forward with numerous new ventures, including construction projects, a new museum dedicated to contemporary applied arts, and an image archive from which a publishing house emerges. While these projects influence one another, they also tie up a great deal of capital and occasionally lead to financial losses. This makes the acquisition of new works more difficult, and some objects are discreetly sold to other museums or through the art market.

Nevertheless, work at the Museum Folkwang continues. The Islamic art department now occupies the entire lower level. Gertrud Osthaus takes on greater responsibility. She oversees the collection and, as head of exhibitions, maintains contacts with contemporary artists such as Else Lasker-Schüler. Lasker-Schüler presents her work in Hagen on two occasions: in 1913, she recites her poetry, and in 1916, she exhibits her drawings.

From 1917 onwards, Karl Ernst Osthaus’s health deteriorates. In 1919, Gertrud Osthaus also falls temporarily ill. Meanwhile, the East Asia expert Karl With takes over as director of the Museum Folkwang and restructures the permanent exhibition. With this reorganisation, the Islamic collection is completed for the time being. Karl Ernst Osthaus passes in 1921.

Nmap

Network Mapper

Project Documentation

Table of Contents

1 Introduction

‘It wasn’t just paintings and sculptures that found their way to us. Osthaus collected everything in which a people’s art expressed its very essence in its finest form. Be it German furniture, Japanese lacquerwork, Javanese shadow puppets [or] Arabic manuscripts.’ — Max Hehemann (1922)

Osthaus’s death marks the end of the Folkwang era in Hagen. In 1922, the collection is sold to the city of Essen and, together with the holdings of the Kunstmuseum Essen, finds a new home in the building designed by the architect Edmund Körner, which opens in 1929. The collection of Islamic art is also given a place here. Unlike in Hagen, it is now presented alongside applied arts from other regions of the world, showcasing the diversity of the collection. At the same time, the profile of the Museum Folkwang changes, with a clearer distinction between fine and applied arts, and new acquisitions focus primarily on Western art. Only one carpet and one Persian vase find their way into the collection during the early years in Essen. Throughout the Second World War, the museum acquires several objects from the Islamicate world in occupied Paris, which are later restituted – that is, returned – to France. Shortly after the end of the war, carpets from two private collections are added to the collection. In the 1950s, enterprising art dealers such as Saeed Motamed from Frankfurt am Main visit Essen. They offer ceramics from Iran and Syria. The star-shaped tile depicting a scene from the *Shāhnāma* and a large storage jar are acquired at this time.

The collection survives the war almost unscathed, though the museum building does not. From 1956, it is replaced by a new building and reopens in 1960. Islamic art continues to be featured in the permanent exhibition. Situated among exhibits from ancient Egypt and classical Greece, it stands alongside the ever-expanding collection of contemporary Western art, which has now become the museum’s flagship. Gradually, many objects of applied art disappear from display, on permanent loan to specialist museums, leaving the collection or vanishing into the depths of the storage. It is not until 2010 that a re-evaluation of common practice begins.

Today, more than 120 years after its foundation, the Museum Folkwang is once again displaying its collection of Islamic art in its entirety for the first time, thereby honouring a previously unknown but important part of its history.