

The Mamluk Sultanate

1250-1500 CE



THE EXHIBITION

This exhibition brings together three strands of Mamluk creativity—metalwork, glass, and architecture—to explore a world where artistry and meaning were inseparable.

The Mamluks, warrior-slaves who rose to become rulers of Egypt and Syria for two and a half centuries, left behind a legacy as both patrons and practitioners of remarkable artistic refinement. Their empire produced works of dazzling technical skill, shaped by spiritual intention.

We begin with metalwork: intricately inlaid basins, large dining trays and incense burners that adorned both sacred and scholarly settings. These objects, often crafted from bronze or brass and inlaid with silver, reveal how precision and geometry gave form to function and devotion alike.

Next, we turn to Mamluk glass—delicately blown, enamelled, and gilded. Mosque lamps, flasks, and beakers shimmer with Qur'anic inscriptions and radiant colour. Even the most fragile vessels reflect the order and rhythm that shaped the Mamluk worldview.

Finally, we enter the architectural landscape of Cairo itself. Through monumental mosques, madrasas, and Sufi lodges, we follow an inward path—from bustling streets to domes filled with light.

Across these three media, the Mamluks gave shape to a cosmos—anchored in order, crafted with intellect, and open to the divine.

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FEATURED IN THE EXHIBITION



INCENSE BURNER

Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo, Egypt.
15108.

Crafted from pierced bronze and decorated with interlaced star motifs, this incense burner merged beauty with function. Its aromatic smoke marked sacred time in mosques, madrasas, and homes. In Mamluk culture, fragrance elevated the senses, making this object a portal to unseen realities and spiritual purification.

EWER

Louvre, Paris, France. OA 72427

This ornate brass ewer, inlaid with silver and copper, features a band of Thuluth calligraphy and lively vegetal scrolls. Amid the decoration, a cluster of small ducks adds a playful touch. Likely used for rosewater or handwashing, it reflects the Mamluk talent for combining dignity with delightful detail.



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DINING TRAY

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA. 91.1.605

This spectacular tray was commissioned for Sultan al-Mu'ayyad Da'ud of Yemen. Its silver-inlaid surface features bold inscriptions of his titles, surrounding a dazzling centre with zodiac signs and seven planetary deities. Blending power, astrology, and artistry, it reflects a courtly world where celestial order mirrored royal authority on earth.

MOSQUE LAMP

Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK. 323-1900

This magnificent lamp, likely made for Sultan Hasan's mosque, exemplifies the height of Mamluk glassmaking. Lavishly gilded and enameled, it reflects elite patronage and technical mastery. Its monumental scale and intricate decoration mirror the grandeur of the architectural complex it once lit—one of Cairo's most ambitious religious foundations.



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GILDED FLASK WITH FLORAL MOTIFS

British Museum, London, UK. 1869.1-20.3

Shaped like a leather pilgrim bottle, this gilded glass flask blends utility with luxury. Likely made as a gift, it evokes travel and devotion. Its fine enamelled decoration suggests courtly refinement, while its form hints at function—perhaps once cradled in leather, carried on sacred journeys across distant lands.



GILDED AND ENAMELED VASE

Museum of Islamic Art, Doha, Qatar.

This brilliant cobalt-blue vase dazzles with enamelled scrollwork, gilded bands, and graceful birds in flight. Likely made for a palace setting, it reflects both luxury and imagination. The vibrant palette and animated decoration suggest a world of elegance, where even a vessel for water became a canvas for wonder.

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BUILDINGS OF INTEREST



MINARET

Mosque of al-Nasir Muhammad, Cairo (1303)

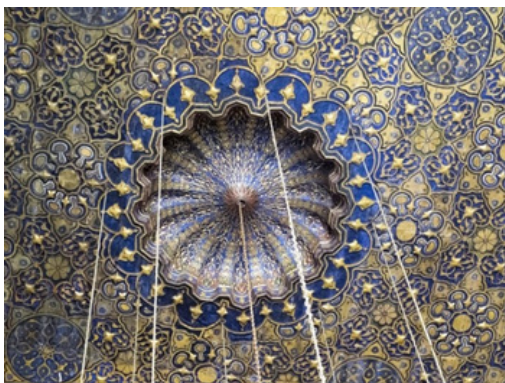
This mosque once stood at the heart of Cairo's citadel. Its striped portal and finely carved minaret recall the blend of local and imported styles that defined Mamluk architecture. The bulbous top and floral motifs are Mongol-inspired, but the balance and restraint are pure Cairo. Once a royal sanctuary, it still watches quietly over the city's old walls.



THE PORTAL

Mosque of Sultan Hasan, Cairo (1361)

This soaring mosque begins not with its vast dome but at the street-level portal—projecting outward with sculpted arches and layered stone. Its design balances opposites: light and dark, noise and quiet, world and spirit. Crossing the threshold, visitors leave behind Cairo's bustle and step into a space of reflection, calm, and divine encounter.



PAINTED CEILING OF THE IWAN AL-QIBLA

Al-Dhaher Barquq Mosque, Cairo (1386)

High above the prayer hall, this dazzling wooden ceiling bursts into bloom. Painted in gold and lapis tones, its patterns ripple outward from a central rosette, drawing the eye—and the spirit—upward. From its centre hangs a chandelier, like a fountain of light. This space was made not just to shelter, but to stir awe.

