



A Spotlight on the Kelsey's Collection

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The Kelsey Museum of Archaeology's collection of more than 100,000 artifacts includes a very large number of items from the Byzantine and Islamic world from the 5th century onward. This temporary exhibition displays just a small sample of these objects and demonstrates the interconnectedness of this time period and region. The unique preservation conditions of the Middle East and especially Egypt have made it possible for many objects such as textiles and wooden elements to survive largely intact. A prevalent theme in the art and daily life of the ancient Middle East was religion, but many other motifs and themes were common in both Christian and Islamic art in places where local traditions persevered for centuries. This display highlights the strengths of the Kelsey Museum's collection and sets the stage for the planned permanent Byzantine and Islamic gallery.

Pilgrimage, Relics, and Souvenirs

Visitors to religious sites often purchased a small object of veneration from the location, which served as both a memento and an outward sign of their faith. These objects, such as the Menas flask on display and other pilgrim flasks, were made by the thousands and traveled far in the ancient world. The medallion mold (photographed here) from the monastery of Saint Simeon Stylites the Younger outside of Antakya, Turkey, made the mass production of a different kind of pilgrimage token possible. Most pilgrimage sites throughout Europe and the Middle East would have sold such items to visitors, often promising health or protection with the items associated with local figures.



Money: Power and Religion

Coins were common throughout the Mediterranean world and Middle East since their invention in the Kingdom of Lydia ca. 600 BCE. The Byzantines continued the Roman tradition of placing portraits of the emperors on their coins. However, with the rise and dominance of Christianity, the previously pagan symbols on the opposite side were often replaced with images of Jesus. Islamic coins, on the other hand, moved away from representational imagery and toward epigraphic designs with calligraphic scripts. Byzantine and Islamic coins still functioned as important pieces of propaganda for both the political power and religious stances of rulers.





Textiles: Weavers and Gods

Textiles were a constant in the life of ancient people, but very few examples remain, mostly from Egypt and the Middle East. The few pieces we do have hint at a colorful and decorative world, with their elaborate geometric and figural designs. Textiles, like many other objects, could be used to display both religious ideas and cultural knowledge. In the world of early Christianity, many earlier Greek myths were still well-known and appeared as common motifs in art, while in the Islamic world, designs tended to center on geometric and calligraphic motifs.

Doors: Art and Prayers

Door lintels were commonly decorated with prayers, as well as religious and natural motifs, in the Late Antique Middle East. Decorated lintels—especially those featuring prayers—continued in use during the transition from the Christian to the Islamic period, providing blessings and warding the house from evil. This lintel from a Christian house bears images of a hare, a Greek cross, and a gazelle, framed by a Coptic inscription that reads, “Lord, God, the Father with his beloved Son, with the Holy Spirit, bless this house, Amen.” Imagery of hares was also popular across different media and appears in a later tiraz fragment on display.

