

NORTHERN LIGHTS

THE DAVID COLLECTION

Tucked away on a quiet street in Copenhagen is a treasure trove of Islamic art. Greatly expanded since its founder, Christian Ludvig David, first became interested in collecting, it has since developed an enviable reputation as a centre of excellence. **James Parry** goes to find out how and why.



Above: The Islamic collection at The David Collection with works from the Ghaznavids, Ghurids and Seljuks dynasties. Photography by Pernille Klomp.

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irector Kjeld von Folsach leans back in his chair. We are sitting in his elegant office overlooking one of Copenhagen's parks and discussing the museum's acquisitions policy. "We always try to aim for the best we can get," he says. "Ours may not be the largest collection in the world, but I like to think that it is hard to beat in terms of quality." A chill wind is blowing outside – autumn has already arrived in the Danish capital – and the first fallen leaves of the season are chasing each other down the street. Yet inside there is a feeling of warmth and optimism, much of the glow coming from the David Collection's exquisitely presented galleries. Scandinavian style has combined with impressive curatorial standards to provide a worthy home for an array of top art treasures.

The David Collection actually comprises three separate collections of art: European 18th-century, Danish Early Modern and Islamic, of which the latter is regarded as the most important in terms of its scope and quality. Ranged over four floors in two houses, the collections are housed in spaces that were completely refurbished and upgraded from 2005–09, during which period the museum was either totally closed or partly open. What one sees as a visitor today are the European collections displayed in period interiors within the original living-rooms, the Danish Modern art now on permanent display in a dedicated space for the first time, and the Islamic collection occupying a network of galleries on the two floors above.

THE EARLY CONNOISSEUR

Christian Ludvig David came from a prosperous middle-class family and was a successful lawyer, further augmenting his inherited wealth with his professional fees and a very successful portfolio of investments. He did not hail from a background in which there was any real tradition of collecting art, but his godmother Agnes Lunn – herself an artist – encouraged him to explore the artistic world. He began by collecting Danish paintings and sculptures, but soon turned his attention to 17th- and 18th-century European art and furniture, which he displayed in his elegant townhouse residence. This was specially adapted to accommodate his growing collection of ceramics in particular, and the top floor was opened regularly to visitors during his lifetime. It still forms part of the museum today, along with an adjacent building acquired later to allow for expansion.



When David died in 1960 – he never married and had no children – he left entire responsibility for his collection to the CL David Foundation and Collection, which had been established 15 years earlier. The by now substantial number of art treasures had originally been destined for an annex of Copenhagen’s Museum of Decorative Art, but David himself decided that it should be handled as a separate endeavour. The entirely private Foundation continues to this day, with a board of trustees overseeing the management and direction of the Collection. There have been only two directors of the Collection since David died: André Leth from 1962 until 1985, since when Dr von Folsach has occupied the post.

The collections of European art include outstanding sets of Meissen, Sèvres and Vincennes porcelain, as well as Dutch and French paintings and top quality furniture by the likes of Thomas Chippendale and David Roentgen, cabinet-maker to Catherine the Great and Marie Antoinette. Most of these pieces were collected by David himself, who would seek out many of his prize objects through the most prominent dealers in Paris and Berlin.

Interestingly, on his death the number of Islamic pieces in the collection was relatively modest and the quality varied, although he had already acquired a number of important early ceramics. A strategic decision was subsequently taken by the trustees and director of the Foundation to focus on the Islamic collection as a means of raising the international profile and stature of the museum generally. A positive and forward-thinking acquisitions policy has seen the Islamic holding grow considerably since then. There are now slightly over 3300 individual Islamic works spanning a diverse range of media and object type, with the majority of these on permanent display. Collectively they encompass works from almost the entire Classical Islamic world, from Iberia in the West as far as the Indian Sub-continent in the East, with an approximate end date of *circa* 1850. The emphasis is very much

on high-status art. “We consider ourselves an art museum, where the aesthetic of each object is paramount,” explains von Folsach; “We don’t focus on ethnography, for example, not because we don’t think it has importance, but because we prefer to play to our strengths.”

GETTING CONNECTED

The Islamic collection is displayed in 20 chronological and geographical sections, such as *Iraq Under the Abbasids* and *The Mamluks of Egypt and Syria*, each selected for their role as an important centre in the development of Islamic culture. This integrated approach – reversing an earlier

Facing page: The museum’s founder Christian Ludvig David in 1958, admiring an earthenware dish originating from Spain in the late 15th–16th century.

Below: A casket made of carved ivory with gilt-bronze fittings. Cordoba, Spain, *circa* 966–968. 9.9 x 14.5 x 9.3 cm.

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Above: A medallion tapestry with silk and gilded lamella of animal substrate spun around cotton. Iraq or Western Iran, first half of the 14th century. Diameter: 69 cm.

Facing page above: *A Ferry Crossing the Gagos River*, a miniature from a copy of *Kitab Al-Hashaish*, a translation of Dioscorides's *De Materia Medica*. Baghdad, Iraq, 1224. 32.2 x 24 cm. Below: A sphinx cast made of modelled and carved frit ware and painted in an opaque white and a turquoise glaze. Raqqa, Syria, second half of the 12th century. Height: 37 cm.

policy of showing all objects grouped by material – helps bring coherence and accessibility to what can otherwise be a bewildering historical and cultural landscape. This approach is further enhanced by the deliberate linking of related objects of different media: in one display case for example, it is possible to view a stamped leather Afghan wallet of the late 12th/early 13th century next to a contemporary limestone matrix, also Afghani, which would have been used for stamping patterns onto leatherwork objects such as wallets.

One especially innovative approach is the presentation of a coin case next to each of the introductory section panels. The cases contain examples of coinage from the appropriate region and era, with touch-screen technology giving visitors the opportunity to view both faces of every coin as well as read captions that

serve as a cipher for general information about the wider context of the other objects in that section. It's an ingenious way of using coins – so often the bridesmaids of a collection – in a proactive and imaginative way.

As we tour the Islamic galleries, I invite von Folsach to show me his 'Top 10' objects. It's a mean trick to pull on a museum director, and I quickly see what an impossible request it is. Quite simply, the standard of everything we are looking at is so high that making choices becomes futile and crass. We wander from case to case, with me marvelling over both the quality of the objects and at von Folsach's encyclopaedic knowledge of their provenance and history. Even so, some pieces literally jump out by virtue of their eye-catching beauty and obviously exquisite craftsmanship: a 10th-century carved ivory casket (the most expensive piece ever acquired for the collection) and a late 10th/early 11th-century bronze incense burner, both from Cordoba; the carved wooden side of a cenotaph from Central Asia, circa 1100; a breathtakingly beautiful 14th-century tapestry medallion from Iraq or Persia, with a kaleidoscope of colours and depicting a Mongol prince flanked by his vizier and general and surrounded by friezes of lotus flowers and animals; a fritware figure of a sphinx from 12th-century Syria, which would once have adorned an elaborate water fountain and was acquired by CL

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David himself; and a fascinating page from the 13th-century Iraqi herbal *Kitab Al-Hashaish*, showing a ferry boat crossing the Gagos River complete with oarsmen and passengers. Perhaps most bedazzling of all is a fragment of a box, probably from Isfahan and dated 597 AH (1200–01). It has a remarkable combination lock, made of brass inlaid with silver and copper, which via four double dials and 16 positions is capable of 4,294,967,296 different combinations.

THE QUEST FOR QUALITY


The number of objects on display is continuing to grow, with acquisitions made largely via dealers but also at auction. “Of course, buying at auction has become so much more competitive, and therefore expensive, in recent years,” observes von Folsach with a wry smile. Even so, the Foundation ensures that the resources are available to make a realistic run for top pieces when they do become available. The most recent coup was the purchase of a stunning *circa* 1600 Mughal textile depicting a musician, recently secured by private sale from a dealer before it was exposed to the frenzy of the marketplace. “There are only two other examples known in museum collections and they are both in poorer condition than this one,” beams von Folsach. This latest prize will go on display at the museum in the coming weeks, joining an already impressive array of textiles. Many of these are housed in a purpose-built Textile Room, with silks, tapestries and carpets not only displayed on the walls but also available for close examination in suites of glazed drawers which visitors can pull

out for themselves. A similar arrangement exists for the museum's superb collection of miniature paintings, of which there are some 300 examples on show, and also for calligraphic works.

The CL David Foundation and Collection's activities extend well beyond the immediate walls of its premises. In 1997 the Syrian government offered Bayt Al-Aqqad, a superb but dilapidated 15th-century Mamluk house, to the Danish Institute in Damascus. The cost of acquisition and restoration were paid for by the Foundation and the building saved by a concerted three-year effort between Syrian craftsmen and Danish architects and conservators. Closer to home, the Foundation also provides substantial funds to support the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, located north of Copenhagen and which houses an outstanding collection of works by figures including Picasso, Giacometti, Dubuffet, Klein, Warhol, Rauschenberg, Moore, Kiefer and Bourgeois.

Meanwhile, thanks to Christian Ludvig David's shrewd investments and the endowment he bequeathed to the Foundation, the museum has none of the financial worries that beset many other similar institutions. Admission is free, both to the collections themselves and to an active events programme that includes lectures and films as well as temporary exhibitions. The most recent of these, entitled *Sufism – The Mystical Path of Islam*, opened on September 2 and runs until 8 April next year. It explores the intriguing world of the Sufis and their impact on Islamic art, with a selection of personal items such as begging bowls, sticks and symbolic charms on display, as well as mystical literature, miniatures,



poetry and calligraphy. The world of Sufi music and the whirling dervish is also covered, with this show underlining the contribution that collections of Islamic art and culture can make in a world that seems ever more polarised. Von Folsach sees the museum as playing an important role in Denmark's relationship with the Islamic world and indeed with Muslim communities within both that country and more generally in Europe. "We feel that Islam is still little known to, or misunderstood by, many people in the West," he says, "and that we have an important role in promoting mutual appreciation through our collections and work here." It's a tough task, but the David Collection is well placed to succeed. 

For more information visit www.davidmus.dk

Facing page: *Musician with Cymbals*. India, circa 1600. Lampas-woven textile with silk. 201.5 x 97 cm.

Above: Fragment of a box with a combination of lock, cast and hammered brass, inlaid with silver and copper. Isfahan, Iran, 1200–1201. 4.4 x 23.5 x 18.5 cm.

All images courtesy The David Collection, Copenhagen.