

Art At The  
Crossroads

Art Across

Cultures,

Ancient Middle

Eastern,

and

Islamic Art



MEMORIAL  
ART GALLERY  
UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER

# “Art is like a magical key

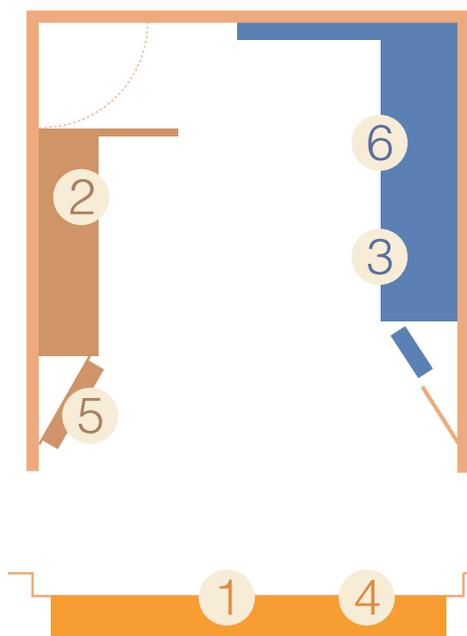
that opens hidden treasures.

Behind the doors it opens are ideas embodied and imaginings given substantial form.”

—M. Fethulla Gülen, Turkish writer and scholar, 2006

The works of art in this gallery represent human creativity and artistic invention from some of the world’s most influential civilizations. Many of these early artists created works decorated with the plants and animals that played important economic, symbolic, or divine roles in the lives of human beings. This guide focuses on a few of these treasures from the Gallery’s collection, offering insights designed to open the doors to these artists’ ideas and imaginings.

-  *Cross-Cultural*
-  *Middle Eastern*
-  *Islamic*



# Beyond Beauty and the Beast

From earliest times, humans have had a complex relationship with animals. Wild and domesticated animals have sustained, coexisted with, and preyed upon humans. Admired for their spirit, power, and grace, animals have also been invested with divine and sacred roles. Ancient artists depicted both real and fantastic animals to reflect these intricate connections of humans and animals within the natural world.



1

## *Harness Ornament with Two Ibexes*

199–1 BCE

Chinese; made in Inner Mongolia

Gilt bronze

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 73.66

This gold-covered plaque, made in the Ordos region of Inner Mongolia, shows two ibexes, or wild mountain goats, face-to-face, their curved horns arching over their backs. Fleet and nimble, the ibex was a favorite subject for artists in many ancient and medieval cultures; tradition holds that an ibex leaping from a mountain would land unharmed on its double scimitar-like horns. The owner of this intricate plaque would have sewn it on clothing or a horse harness as a display of personal wealth and status. Look for other objects nearby that feature the ibex.



2

## *Master of Animals Finial*

799–700 BCE

Iranian; made in Luristan

Bronze

Gift of Henry Hirschland, 2007.35

Theories abound as to the meaning, symbolism, and function of these ancient bronze finials that represent the “Master of Animals,” one of the most important motifs in ancient Middle Eastern art. The central figure is a human male, his outstretched arms grasping the necks of long-snouted, two-headed beasts with the beaks of eagles and rounded haunches with clawed feet. The figure may represent Gilgamesh, the superhuman hero of Mesopotamian mythology, or Sraosha, the early Iranian god of justice. What seems clear, though, is that this finial symbolizes humankind’s dominion over the predatory forces of nature.



3

## *Bowl*

1200–1299 CE

Persian

Earthenware, glaze

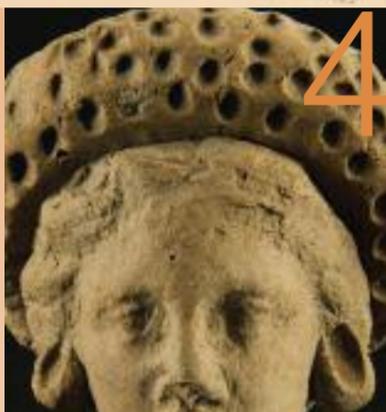
R.T. Miller Fund, 52.14

A bird in the center surrounded by felines chasing rabbits—is the imagery on this bowl simply decoration or does it tell a story? One of the oldest forms of storytelling, fables use animals in order to make a point about human behavior. This medieval Persian bowl may depict “The Ascetic Cat and His Prey,” an early Indian fable translated in the 800s from Sanskrit into Arabic by Abdullah Ibn ak-Muqaffa. The fable tells of an argument between a partridge and a hare who seek judgment on their case from an ascetic cat, known for his spirituality and self-denial. Claiming poor hearing, the cat tricks them into coming nearer, then pounces and kills them both!



# The Power of Flowers

Plants and flowers have provided humans with sustenance, shade, and pleasure for thousands of years. Many ancient cultures equated the fertile and fallow periods of vegetation, following the cycles of the changing seasons, with the human cycles of life, death, and rebirth. The motifs of leaves, vines, blossoms, and trees reflect the sacred, symbolic, and divine nature of flowers as well as their decorative value in art.



4

## *Female Head*

299–200 BCE

Egyptian, Ptolemaic Period  
Terracotta

The C. Herbert Ocumpaugh  
Collection, 28.92

Mysterious, beautiful, contemplative—this small ceramic head of a young woman offers a few clues as to her origins. While her hairstyle and earrings are typical to Greek art, her thick wreath, representing hundreds of tiny flowers threaded onto a rope of grass, indicates she may be Egyptian. Archeologists have discovered similar wreaths made of real flowers in Egyptian tombs, suggesting this head was made in Egypt after Alexander the Great conquered that land in 332 BCE. The flowers were most likely roses, also believed to have been introduced into Egypt by the Greeks in the 300s BCE.



5

## *Winged Genius*

ca. 865–860 BCE

Assyrian

Alabaster

R.T. Miller Fund, 44.10

An imposing winged guardian figure, called a Genius, visually dominates this carved wall fragment from the throne room of the powerful Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II. The real key to the image’s meaning, however, appears at the right. The Genius’ outstretched hands gently care for the flowers of the Assyrian sacred tree, a stylized date palm symbolizing the divine power to bestow life. Many wall reliefs from the palace depict the king and his supernatural attendants celebrating religious rituals, especially that of tending the sacred tree. Scenes associating the king with divine figures and powerful ancient symbols reinforced his position as mediator between humans and the gods.



6

## *Bowl*

1200–1299 CE

Persian

Ceramic, glaze

R.T. Miller Fund, 52.11

This elegant ceramic vessel depicts seven seated Persian nobles dressed in luxurious robes and holding a flower or vine in each hand. The lives of such elite members of society revolved around their courts, where they entertained visitors with lavish banquets, drinking games, and performances of poetry, music, and storytelling. The calligraphy that decorates the rim of the bowl may shed light on the interpretation of these floral motifs, but aspects of medieval Persian cultural life also offer many possibilities. These flowers and vines may refer to poetic language, the ceremonial use of floral scents at nobles’ drinking parties, or even offerings of romance or hospitality.



## What do “BCE” and “CE” mean?

BCE (Before the Common Era) and CE (Common Era) refer to the same time periods as the more traditional BC (Before Christ) and AD (“Anno Domini,” which means “The Year of our Lord”).

In today’s global society, constant interaction between people of all religious beliefs requires a shared, or common, way of reckoning time. Although the terms BCE and CE have their origins in the Christian calendar, they are now widely used by people of many faiths and cultures.

For this reason, the Memorial Art Gallery has adopted BCE and CE for use in its galleries.

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To learn more about works of art in the Gallery’s collection, school programs, and upcoming exhibitions and events, visit our website at

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