

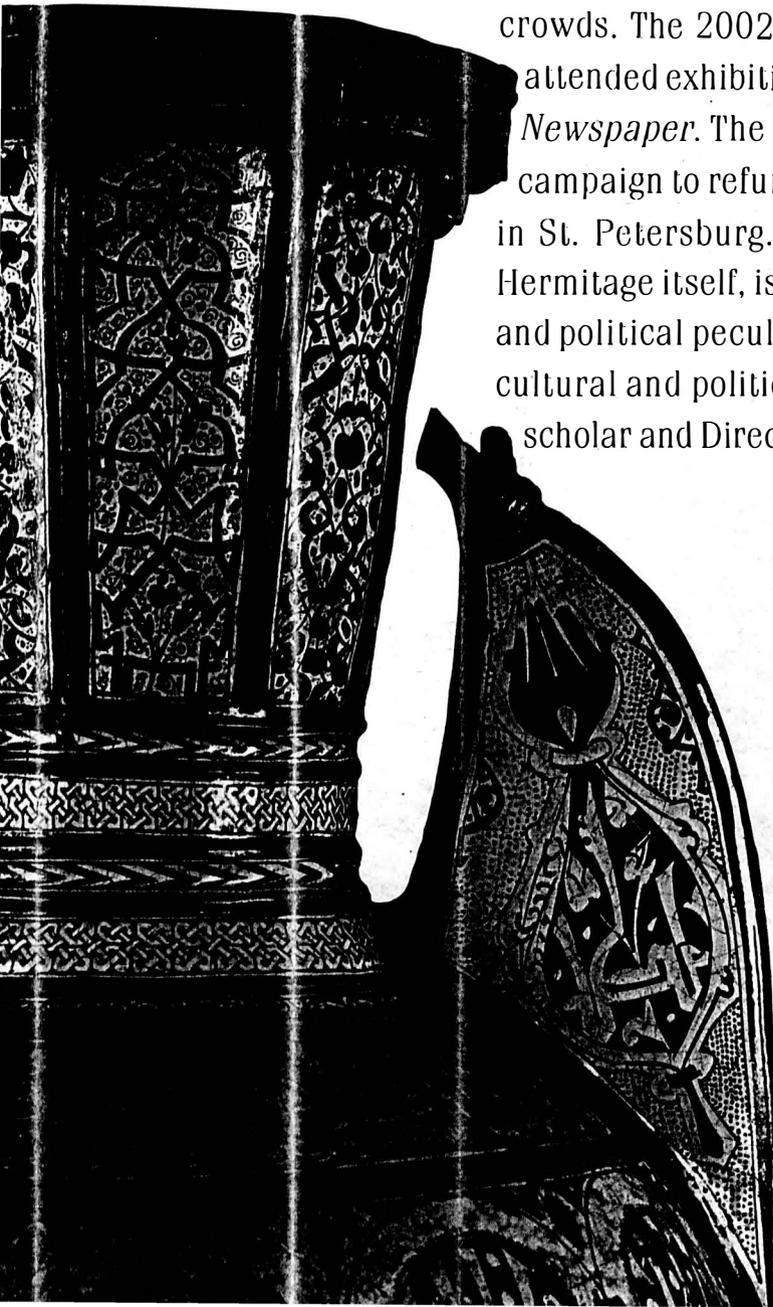
N 241

# ISLAM

## in its Russian Context

In March 2004 a selection of famous masterpieces from the Islamic collection of the Hermitage will be displayed in the Hermitage Rooms at Somerset House. It is Britain's turn to enjoy the Islamic treasures which have been shown in Amsterdam, St. Petersburg and Kazan over the past five years – always attracting crowds. The 2002 show in St. Petersburg was the second best attended exhibition of the year worldwide, according to the *Art Newspaper*. The London exhibition is the precursor of a major campaign to refurbish and reopen the Middle Eastern galleries in St. Petersburg. The story of the collection, like that of the Hermitage itself, is interesting both as a reflection of the cultural and political peculiarities of Russia, and as part of the country's cultural and political history. Prof. Mikhail Piotrovsky, Islamic scholar and Director of the Hermitage, introduces the collection

The lustre decorated  
Fortuny vase, a Hispano-  
Moresque masterpiece

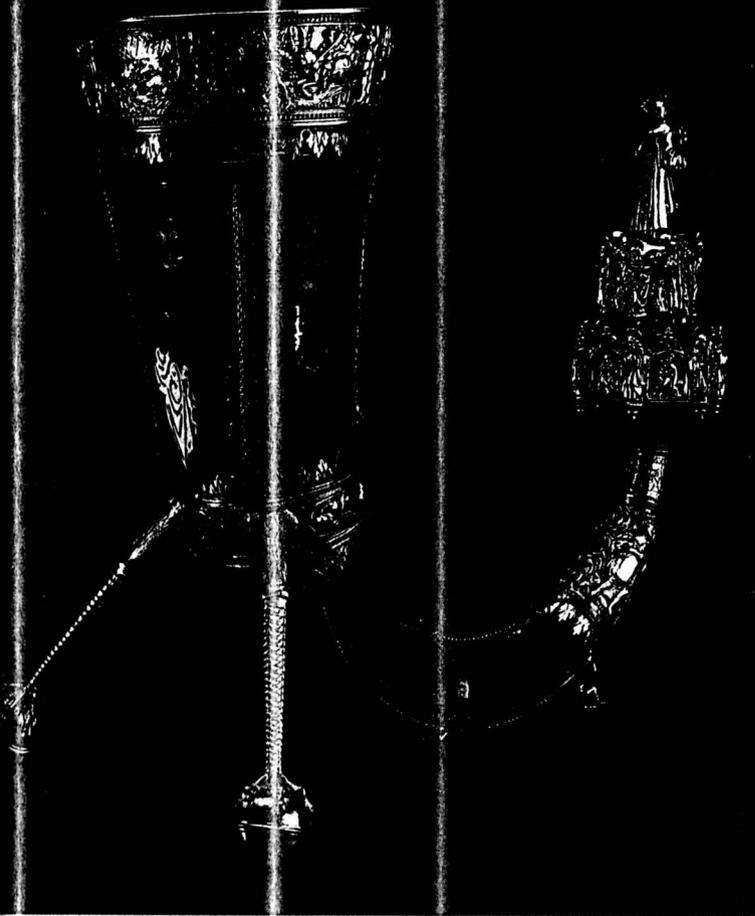


Russia is a Muslim country. From time immemorial Islam has been the country's second faith after Orthodoxy. Significant parts of the Russian empire were predominantly Muslim. Some directly adjoined the core Russian lands; others were even situated within them. Muslim noblemen were always part of the Russian ruling class, and a large number of Russian noble families are of Muslim origin.

Objects of Islamic art are thus part of Russia's own cultural heritage. The exhibition of the museum's Islamic treasures, together with the refurbishment and reopening of the Hermitage Islamic galleries, are matters of national as well as international importance – particularly in view of the exceptional quality of the collection.

The story begins with the Mongol conquerors who established a powerful, internationally orientated regime within the borders of Russia – now known as the "Golden Horde". The rulers of the Golden Horde, who adopted Islam in the early fourteenth century, had broad trading links with both East and West. The wonderful creations of the Horde's jewellers, which combine both Middle- and Far-Eastern traditions, are an exotic part of the Hermitage's collection. Excavations of Golden Horde towns and burial sites uncovered not only a wealth of objects created under the Horde, but also pieces imported from other parts of the Muslim East, including wonderful examples of glasswork decorated with enamel. Among the Hermitage's recent acquisitions are a group of painted glass goblets which originated in Mameluke Syria, but were found in the south of Russia.

From even earlier times, trading caravans from Iran, Mesopotamia



A 14th-century enameled glass horn, made in Syria, with 16th-century silver-gilt mounts

and Syria penetrated deep into the north of Russia in search of furs and this trade continued to flourish during the era of the Golden Horde. They traded furs for silver coins and other objects made of silver. Many of these coins later entered the Hermitage's numismatic collection, while the silver vessels have given the museum an unsurpassed collection of medieval silverware, both pre-Islamic and Islamic. Two pieces are particularly remarkable, both decorated with scenes of feasting: a large eighth-century dish and a smaller one of the eleventh century. While on the first the feasting ruler looks like an Iranian shah, on the second it is easy to distinguish a leader from the Turkic steppe.

Diplomatic gifts presented to Russian emperors and empresses constitute another dazzling feature of the Hermitage's collection. In 1739 Nadir Shah seized Delhi and plundered the treasury of the Great Moguls. Wanting to impress his powerful neighbours with his victories, he sent a vast embassy to Russia with elephants and gifts from the booty. Thus the Hermitage became the owner of one of the finest collections of Mogul jewels in the world.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Muslim territories to the south of the Russian empire were ideal hunting grounds for collectors of Islamic art and museums, yielding treasures from every corner of the Islamic world. The indefatigable archaeologist Count A. Bobrinsky sought out a superb collection of bronze objects in Central Asia, among which was the world-renowned masterpiece, the Bobrinsky Bucket, or Herat Bucket, a bronze vessel made in Herat in 1163 with a marvellous inlay of pictures and inscriptions. The detailed information provided by the inscriptions has made the bucket a key standard of comparison for scholars. They name the man who commissioned the bucket, its owner, the craftsmen who made it and the date of its manufacture. The images are arranged in bands representing different levels of creation – from astrological signs to hunting

scenes, depictions of everyday life and myth.

Among the most important of the museum's own purchases are items from the Basilevsky collection, which was bought en bloc in 1884. Alexander Basilevsky, who lived for a long time in Paris, collected art of the Middle Ages, both Western and Eastern. The Hermitage acquired a series of masterpieces from him, including two massive, lustre-decorated vases. The so-called Fortuny vase – it had belonged to the Spanish painter of that name – is among the great achievements of Hispano-Moresque art, with a rich lustre glaze and elegant calligraphic decoration; the second is Persian, also with lustre decoration, though of a different type, and again portraying different levels of creation – with a splendid band of polo players in the middle.

In the nineteenth century Islamic art, and Oriental art in general, was not treated as a separate section of the Hermitage collection. The Oriental Department was a twentieth-century innovation, created



Bronze aquamanile, inlaid with silver, Iran, 1206 AD

shortly after the Revolution. While researchers continued the great Russian tradition of Oriental scholarship, they had a new didactic purpose: to demonstrate the rich variety of world culture and the achievements of all peoples, not just of Europe. This ideological approach had an unexpected side effect. The research of Oriental scholars gave a sense of national identity to many Soviet republics which had formerly merely considered themselves part of the Russian empire – and the ground was laid for their secession from the Soviet Union.

The Hermitage began to highlight the cultural significance of the East in the 1920s through a series of exhibitions dedicated to Islamic art. They were organised by Iosif Orbeli, the first head of the Oriental Department who later became famous as the Director of the Hermitage during the siege of Leningrad. Orbeli pursued his collect-



left:  
Mihr 'Ali  
*Portrait of Fath 'Ali Shah,*  
Iran, 1809-1810AD

below left:  
The Bobrinsky bucket,  
bronze inlaid with silver,  
Herat, 1163AD

below right:  
Aquamanile in the form of  
a bird, bronze inlaid with  
silver and copper, Iraq (?),  
796-797AD

Soviet and now independent Kazakhstan. There it has again become part of Muslim ritual, no longer a work of art in a museum.

In the 1920s Oriental art helped to call a halt to the Soviet authorities' barbaric sales of the Hermitage's collections to the West. In response to a letter from Orbeli in October 1932, Stalin forbade any sales from the Hermitage Oriental Department. As a result, numerous objects whose actual provenance was debatable were suddenly found to relate to the Orient. The argument over a Byzantine folding icon neatly illustrates the museum's strategy. The authorities, bent on its sale, considered it a Western work of art. The Oriental Department, however, won the day, since imitations of Arabic Kufic inscriptions were clearly visible on the shields of the warriors.

Orbeli was a specialist in the Christian cultures of the Caucasus,



ing activities vigorously – and not always with the greatest regard for bureaucratic formalities; in this way he not only built up the Hermitage's collection, but also saved numerous cultural treasures from destruction as Soviet Russia conducted its active campaign against Islam.

Unlike Orthodox Christianity, Islam developed a significant role in rallying opposition to Soviet power. For this reason everything connected with the faith – and particularly Arabic and Koranic manuscripts – was doomed to destruction. A huge number of manuscripts and other treasures of Islamic culture perished. But many of those that survived did so because they were transferred to Leningrad. Thus, for example, the ritual objects from one of the most sacred sites of Central Asia, the Mausoleum of Ahmad Yasevi, were saved. Their transfer to the Hermitage was nominally arranged as part of a temporary exhibition. Among them was an enormous bronze cauldron with inscriptions which, had it not been sent to Leningrad, would have been melted down. Thanks to the Hermitage this artistic masterpiece not only survived, but was published and became famous round the world. A temporary exhibition, however, is temporary – and in the 1980s the cauldron was returned to the then

and no doubt this is why he also turned his energies to the exploration of one of the most important problems of Islamic art: the extent to which it is conditioned by the Muslim faith. In lectures and articles Orbeli and his colleagues developed the idea of an overarching culture of the East, which encompassed religious differences. Today it is almost universally accepted that scholars talk not of the influence of Christian on Islamic art or vice versa, but of the gradual development of a unified artistic language conditioned by historical and social reality; for Christians and Muslims lived side by side in the Middle East and influenced each other in all spheres.

The Hermitage collection contains a superb example of this cultural synthesis – a glass horn, acquired by Peter the Great for his *Kunstammer*, which was made in Syria in the fourteenth century. It is decorated with Arabic inscriptions dedicated to a certain ruler, and images of figures similar to the Evangelists. It was almost certainly commissioned by a Christian from a Muslim craftsman. Carried back to Europe at the time of the Crusades, it was provided with silver-gilt mounts in the sixteenth century, probably in Germany, to make it into a Christian wedding present. The Muslim and Christian cultures are intimately interwoven.