

MUSEUM

# THE FINEST SMALL MUSEUM IN EUROPE

THE FITZWILLIAM

In the back corridors of an internationally renowned museum in the university town of Cambridge, England, sits an unsung collection of Islamic ceramics. **Ingrid Soren** discovers how the Fitzwilliam Museum is cataloguing them for the first time and how the star pieces among them are being meticulously conserved.

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he Neoclassical portico of the Fitzwilliam Museum dominates one of the wide streets leading into the centre of Cambridge, and its proximity to Peterhouse, the first of the town's colleges to be founded back in the 13th century, is emblematic of the long connection between museum and university. The Fitzwilliam was founded by Richard, the 7th Viscount Fitzwilliam of Merrion (1745–1816), a Grand Tourist who, on his death, bequeathed to the university a magnificent library of 10,000 rare books and a collection of paintings, Old Master drawings, prints and musical autographs to “further the Increase of Learning and other great Objects of that Noble Foundation”.

After the museum opened in 1848, its collections grew by gift and bequest. The great 20th-century Director, Sir Sydney Cockerell, a friend of Ruskin, William Morris and Thomas Hardy, attracted donors and endowments and, in his own words, “turned it into a palace”. Under Cockerell’s aegis many more treasures were acquired and innovatively exhibited in ‘country house style’ combining fine with decorative arts, including furniture and Oriental rugs. A major work by Titian, ancient Greek vases, 14th–15th-century illuminated manuscripts, English silver, works by William Blake, the complete Kelmescott Press editions of William Morris, Japanese prints and a collection of Impressionist drawings and paintings were displayed in the ever-expanding buildings.

This spread:  
The exterior of the  
Fitzwilliam Museum.





Below: Ayyubid stem cup.  
Early 13th century, *circa*  
1200–65. Buff fritware, wheel  
thrown and mould made,  
covered in a white glaze  
painted in blue and brown  
lustre. Height: 11.5 cm.  
Width: 15.5 cm. Collection of  
Frank Brangwyn.

Facing page: A view  
of the interior of the  
Fitzwilliam Museum.

## TURNING TO THE EAST

Over the years, collectors also donated Middle Eastern antiquities and objects from ancient Egypt. The great civilisations of Sumeria, Babylon and Assyria are represented by, among other things, a gigantic bas-relief from Nimrud of Ashurnarsipal II, King of Assyria from 883–859 BC, which rivals that held at the British Museum; cuneiform tablets; and a seventh-century inscribed brick from Nineveh. Exquisitely carved Phoenician ivories from the eighth century BC are displayed near ancient Syrian incantation bowls and alabaster Arabian heads from Yemen, made *circa* 100 BC and whose stark purity of line evokes the sculpture of Brancusi. The simple abstract forms of alabaster eye idols of 3200 BC from Tell Brak in north-eastern Syria are surprisingly Modernist in concept and style with their

flat trapezoid bodies and oversized eyes.

The collection continued to grow in size and diversity with stele from Carthage, Anatolian pottery and Persian miniatures. A stunning Ottoman tile panel of flowers and trees from the late 16th century was donated in 1909 by the newly formed Friends of the Fitzwilliam. Made in Damascus, the tiles are painted in bright blue, green and turquoise, purple and black under a clear glaze. A white vase is decorated with stylised flowers and foliage, surrounded by more plants and leaves against a blue ground.

Islamic pottery is at the heart of the Middle Eastern collection, yet only half of it is currently on display. It is being catalogued for the first time by Dr Rebecca Bridgman, Researcher for Islamic Pottery at the museum since 2009. “This collection is largely unpublished and little-known



outside a few specialists. The work I'm doing is revealing that it is of international importance. It's really big news, as this is an extremely significant collection that's barely been worked on until now." Predominantly Central Asian, with a significant number of Anatolian objects and pieces from Syria and Egypt, the collection's importance is only just being recognised. Particularly noteworthy is a reconstructed ruby lustre bowl made in southern Iraq, probably Basrah, in the ninth century. Ruby lustre is produced by painting a solution of copper oxide (as opposed to silver oxide, which is generally used for lustreware) onto a pre-fired and glazed bowl, then firing it again to produce a metal-glass layer on the surface. More than a thousand years later it gleams in a display case, a tribute to an unknown potter and the conservator's art. "Ruby lustre is so rare", says Bridgman with a glint in her eye, "and this is absolutely one of our showpieces."

### WORKS OF WONDER

A late 12th-century Iranian ceramic hawk presides over one of the entrances to the Ancient Near East gallery, a broad-shouldered and powerful presence. To its right, in one of the 1930s brass cases, is a finely potted under-glaze painted dish from early 13th-century Iran. A leopard dominates the interior, drawn in flowing lines and spotted with groups of dots arranged in triangles. The feline jaw is open, eye glaring as it raises its right paw. Leafy foliage behind the leopard is painted against a blue background, and the exterior of the bowl – which is incredibly light – is decorated with a frieze of black water weeds separated by vertical blue lines radiating from the base rim.

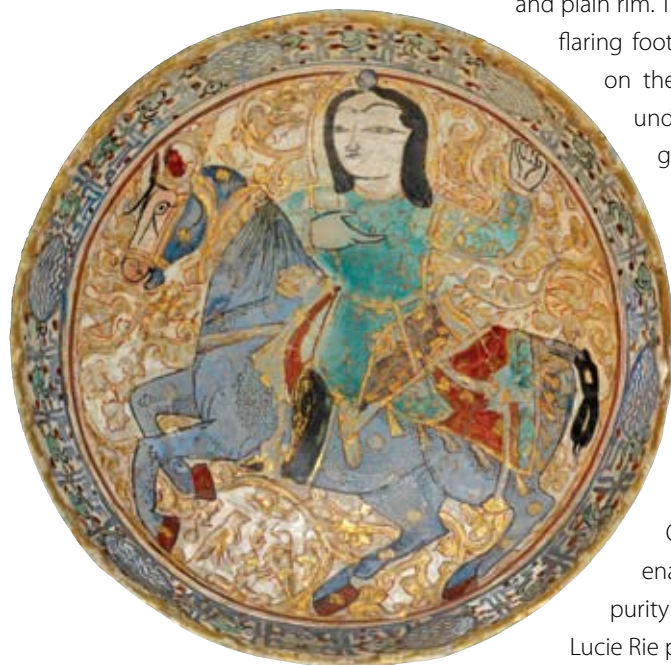
A richly ornamented Minai bowl, probably made in Kashan, Iran, in the late 12th or early 13th century, is a showpiece of one of the neighbouring cases. Wheel-thrown, multicoloured and gilded, it is painted in blue and turquoise, purple, red and black, with gold leaf gilding over the glaze. Around the rim, a frieze of Arabic



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Below: Seljuk bowl. *Circa* 1175–1220. Fritware. 9 x 21 x 21. Collection of Oscar Raphael.

Facing page: Ottoman tile panel. Late 16th/early 17th century, *circa* 1550–1650, Damascus. Panel composed of three rows of three tiles and one tile above the middle tile of the top row. Earthenware covered with white slip and painted in bright blue, green turquoise, greyish-purple and black; under a clear glaze. A reserved white vase decorated with stylised flowers and foliage, flanked by conical plants and further flowers and foliage against a blue ground. Ebonised wood frame decorated with gilding. Height: 104.14 cm. Width: 76.2 cm.



script is interspersed with turquoise leaves and red dots. In the roundel, a horseman – with left hand raised and right hand pointing left – wears a turquoise tunic and rides a blue horse with red ears and hooves. The image is highlighted in red and gold and with areas of low relief. On the exterior, the painted rim has gilded diamonds outlined in red on a turquoise background while below, diamond cartouches surround turquoise dots gilded and also picked out in red.

The purchase of renowned artist Frank Brangwyn’s collection in 1934 brought yet more riches to the Fitzwilliam. An early 13th-century piece of Islamic pottery is among them, currently on display although in need of conservation; from Syria comes an Ar-Raqqa stem cup in lustreware, wheel thrown with a conical bowl and plain rim. The stem has a collared neck and flaring foot, whilst Arabic script is painted on the body in blue, surrounded by undulating leaves against a background of scrolls, all painted in lustre. Not far from this treasure is displayed another of Brangwyn’s exquisite pieces, an Abbasid bowl in glazed earthenware, painted in green under a green glaze with radiating lines that run from a concentric band on the rim to a large dot in the centre of the base. Of 9th–10th century Iranian provenance it may well be, but it has the purity and simplicity of a 20th-century Lucie Rie pot.

In 1948 the Fitzwilliam bought, from Ham House in Surrey where it had been in the family for three hundred years, a showpiece Iznik jug with silver gilt mounts. The jug was made in the second half of the 16th century at the famous pottery production centre of Iznik, south of Istanbul. It was traded across to Elizabethan England, where the silver gilt base, lid and handle, hallmarked AD 1592–3, were added to the jug. Probably used for serving beer at table, it came into the possession of Elizabeth Tollemache, who had connections with royalty and belonged to a secret organisation supporting King Charles II during his exile from England. One can still see her initials inscribed into the handle.

### SAVING THE DAY

It is due to the extraordinary skills of painter turned conservator Penny Bendall that many of these ceramics are now in a fit state to be displayed, some for the first time. Bendall was responsible for piecing together three monumental 17th-century Chinese vases that crashed off a windowsill (victims of the ‘country house style’ of display) when in 2006 a member of the public famously fell down the stairs at the Fitzwilliam and knocked into them. After painstaking and prolonged restoration – the pieces filled no less than 24 trays – the vases are now safely back (in a display cabinet!) with hardly a hairline crack visible. Bendall lectures at Sotheby’s and Christies on conservation and ethics, with a particular interest in Contemporary art. The dexterity of the work she is carrying out on the Islamic pot-

**The Fitzwilliam has... strong links to the university’s art history degree.**



PANEL OF DAMASCUS TILES, 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> CENT. — GIVEN BY THE FRIENDS OF THE FITZWILLIAM, 1909



[There is a] plan to mount an exhibition of the emerging Islamic pottery collection alongside publication of the new catalogue.

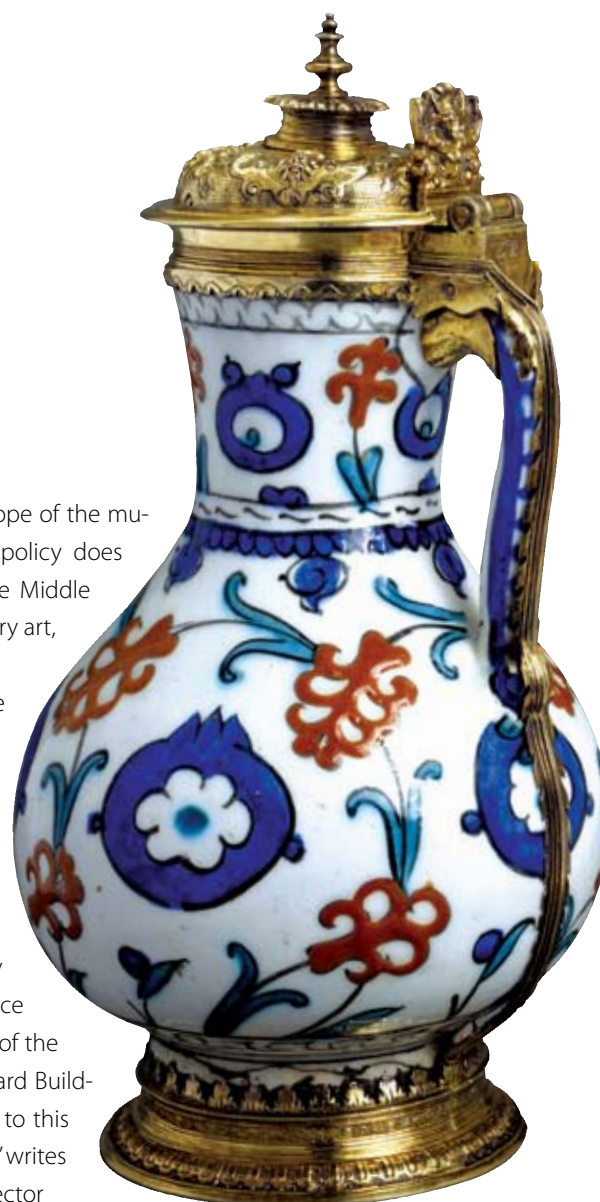
tery collection at the Fitzwilliam is breathtaking, although as she says, “You also need to be very strong visually to do this work. It takes practice and proper training, of course, but the visual eye seems to be an inborn quality. I’m not sure it can be taught.”

The Fitzwilliam has a thriving Education Department with strong links to the university’s art history degree: students doing an Islamic pottery class with Professor Deborah Howard have hands-on experience of how objects were made in the past, making a direct connection to the present. “Looking at a piece from behind glass doesn’t give you the same level of understanding as touching the object and working out how it’s made,” adds Bridgman. “It’s an important way of understanding art.”

A lively exhibitions programme is also a hallmark of the Fitzwilliam. In 2010 the show *Epic of the Persian Kings* explored the artistic legacy of the *Shahnameh* by 11th-century poet Ferdowsi, exhibiting a spectacular range of manuscripts and Persian miniature paintings, some of which can be seen in an online display on the Fitzwilliam’s website. Meanwhile there is an outline plan to mount an exhibition of the emerging Islamic pottery collection alongside publication of the new catalogue, but funding has to be found. The last Middle Eastern acquisition was a bequest in 1991 and it is only by dint of such generous gifts and private donations that work such as Bridgman’s can continue.

Although the scope of the museum’s acquisitions policy does not currently include Middle Eastern Contemporary art, the Fitzwilliam has benefitted from the National Art Collections Fund, the Purchase Grant Fund administered by the V&A, and Memorial Funds. The Heritage Lottery Fund provided finance for the construction of the elegant new Courtyard Building of 2004. “Thanks to this widespread support,” writes recently retired Director Duncan Robinson, “the museum can look towards the future with confidence, as a university museum with outstanding collections.” Described in 1990 by the Director of the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC as “the finest small museum in Europe”, Cambridge’s Fitzwilliam will continue to play an ever widening role regionally, nationally and internationally as it approaches the bicentenary in 2016 of its first, landmark bequest. 

For more information visit [www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk](http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk)



Facing Page: Alabaster head from a funerary statue of a man. Circa 100 BC. Tama, South Yemen.

Above: Ottoman Jug. Late 16th century, circa 1580–93. Fritware. Height: 26.2 cm. Width: 14.2 cm.

All images courtesy the Fitzwilliam Museum.