

FALL PREVIEW: ART

A New Home for Arab Treasures

BY KELLY CROW

FOUR YEARS AFTER New York's Metropolitan Museum renovated its lauded Greek and Roman galleries, curators two flights up are scurrying to reopen the museum's Islamic art galleries by Nov. 1.

The eight-year project amounts to a sweeping overhaul: Around 19,000 square feet is being given over to 15 galleries that chronologically trace the cultural high points of dozens of Islam-influenced cultures stretching from the Moors in Spain to the Mughals in India. Altogether, the 1,200 works on view will span 13 centuries. It's no wonder that the new name being given to the galleries—Art of the Arab lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and Later South Asia—is such a mouthful.

Gone is the circa-1975, cul-de-sac configuration that grouped objects by theme or material. The new layout is arranged like a snaking timeline, so it's visually varied and easier to understand. It's clear that the museum is also aiming for greater sensitivity: A blue-tiled prayer niche, or mihrab, from a 14th-century mosque has been reoriented so it faces roughly east, the direction of Mecca.

"So often the issues around Islam get polarized," said director and chief executive Thomas Campbell, "but we're hoping to tell a more complex story."

During a recent visit, installation was in full swing as curators maneuvered around forklifts and workers used a vise to assemble a Mughal-

era wooden colonnade. A ceiling from 16th-century Spain has been cleaned and lit with more spotlights to better show off its effusions of geometric patterns and gold-leaf tendrils.

Arguably the most extensive redo involves the Damascus Room, a winter reception room built in 1707 for a wealthy Syrian family. The 26-foot-long, wood-paneled room is rimmed on three sides by red-velvet divans that face a gurgling marble fountain. When the museum installed the room three decades ago, visitors had to enter the room via a side door rather than the original main entry near the fountain. An Arabic poem that runs like a border around the upper reaches of the room was also garbled.

Now, the room has been rearranged to suit tradition, thanks to the museum's wood conservator Mechtild Baumeister who toured Ottoman reception rooms in Syria and came back to discover an overlooked numbering system on the panels lining the museum's version. As a result, the poem is now legible and begins, "The lightning saw the darkness frown and smiled."

Other highlights include a new Moroccan courtyard area lined with wildly patterned tiles modeled after designs in Spain's Moorish palace, the Alhambra. The courtyard's carved wooden doors are based on a 14th-century pair that belonged to the National Museum of Kuwait but were burned when that museum was heavily damaged by looting and fire during the first Gulf War.



EIGHT YEARS IN THE MAKING: The Met's reconfigured Damascus Room, above and below; carving stucco in the Moroccan courtyard, left and far left.



COMING ATTRACTIONS



A Fractured Vision

Every season, a gallery show ignites the public's imagination with the type of fervor usually reserved for a blockbuster museum exhibit. This fall, a lead contender is "Georges Braque: Pioneer of Modernism," a retrospective opening Oct. 12 at New York's Acquavella Galleries. For the show, which includes more than 40 works spanning the artist's five-decade career, about 14 museums are loaning works. Braque (1882-1963) was a co-founder of two milestone 20th-century art movements, Fauvism and Cubism. He grew up in a family of Argenteuil craftsmen, but by his early 20s he had fallen in with mavericks like Henri Matisse, who were using Technicolor palettes to convey emotion and summery heat in their paintings. Parisian patricians were shocked, dubbing the group Fauves, or beasts. Shortly after, Braque took another radical turn and began playing with perspective, seeing if he could paint a group of tabletop objects from several vantage points all at once—a kaleidoscope on canvas. In 1909, he befriended young Spanish artist Pablo Picasso, and for the next six years they churned through the ideas that became Cubism. Braque's fascination with fractured art never let up, even as Picasso moved on. The Acquavella show makes the case that Braque's use of flat perspective and unusual materials influenced later greats like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. **Above, his "Houses at L'Estaque," 1907.**



The Da Vinci Code

On Nov. 9, London's National Gallery is bringing together 69 of Leonardo da Vinci's surviving works in what is likely to be the season's blockbuster. "Leonardo da Vinci: Painter at the Court of Milan" focuses on the artist's innovations as a painter, reexamining icons like the 1488 painting, "The Lady with an Ermine," above. The subject of that work, Cecilia Gallerani, was the witty mistress of Milan's young ruler Ludovico Maria Sforza, for whom Da Vinci worked as court painter for 18 years beginning in 1482. Da Vinci was only 30 when he joined Sforza's court, and a closer look at the paintings and drawings he completed during his tenure there reveals much about how he developed as an artist. Da Vinci upended European painting tradition by applying a scientist's precision to his canvases—botanists can identify his flowers—but he was also able to capture his sitters' personalities. The Louvre wouldn't loan the "Mona Lisa," for this show, but it did part with Da Vinci's "The Virgin of the Rocks." The National Gallery plans to hang that work beside its later version of the same subject by the artist, allowing for a rare, side-by-side comparison.



A Chinese Modernist

Prices have soared for paintings by China's modern masters like Fu Baoshi—Christie's Hong Kong got \$9 million for his 1945 "The Song of the Pipa Player" last fall. Now, American museums are giving the artist a closer look. On Oct. 16, the Cleveland Museum of Art opens "Chinese Art in an Age of Revolution: Fu Baoshi." The show will travel to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in January. Fu Baoshi (1904-1965) lived in southwest China during a tumultuous era as the country navigated the collapse of the Qing dynasty, the effects of World War II and the ascension of a new nation-state governed by the Communist Party. Many Chinese artists, looking to the West, gave up painting traditional landscapes. Fu held onto his ink brush but found ways to experiment with modern styles like abstraction, says Anita Chung, Cleveland's curator of Chinese art. At first glance, his 1945 "Whispering Rain at Dusk" seems like a Ming-era mountain scene, but its loose brushwork hews closer to action painting, the spontaneous style typically associated with abstract expressionists like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. **Above, his "Heaven and Earth Glowing Red," 1964.**

California Dreaming

Nine years ago, the Getty Foundation set out to gather archives and oral histories of post-war artists in Los Angeles with the idea that a few local museums might exhibit examples of West Coast contemporary art. The project has snowballed into a regional group show, "Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945-1980," involving 68 exhibits and nearly every art institution between Santa Barbara and San Diego, beginning Sept. 30 and running into next year. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art is exhibiting Edward Kienholz's "Five Car Stud," a horrifying 1969-1972 installation that depicts a group of white men attacking a black man in the headlights glow of five encircled cars. The J. Paul Getty Museum resurrects Ronald Davis, an artist hailed in the 1960s for adding trompe l'oeil twists to his geometric abstracts like "Vector," above, while the Otis College of Art and Design focuses on L.A.'s early feminist artists, like Judy Chicago.

