



This photo is available  
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Christianity and Islam.

**With its Christian narrative motifs, a canteen made in the Muslim world in the thirteenth century reminds us how cultures can learn from one another new techniques, conceptions of beauty, and even interpretations of shared religious narratives.**

*Canteen. Syria, mid-thirteenth century. Brass, diameter 14 ½". Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.: Purchase, F1941.10.*

# Shared Stories in Metal

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

The Madonna and Child Enthroned is the surprising central image on this beautiful canteen produced in the Muslim world during the thirteenth century.<sup>†</sup> Constructed from seven brass sections soldered together, the canteen weighs eleven pounds empty and sixty-six pounds full of water. Though it is far from portable, it is functional. A conical socket on the flat back allows the piece to be placed atop a post and turned by the handles until its contents, filtered through the strainer in the mouth, pour out.

Though the shape of the canteen originates from pre-Islamic times, its distinctive style and decoration confirm that it was made in the thirteenth century in Syria. Its Mosul style of metalwork—named for the northern Iraqi city that was a leading center for metal production and home to a large Christian population living under Muslim rule—is well known. Indeed, the names of some twenty Syrian craftsmen in this era bear the epithet *al-mawsili* (from Mosul), probably because they were trained in master-apprentice workshops in that city. Mosul craftsmen invented the technique of spinning a disc of metal against a chuck (or form) rotating at high speed on a spinning lathe, a method that greatly reduced manufacturing time. They also developed a manner of exterior decoration, seen in this piece, which requires inlaying a brass surface with silver and a black organic material.

Christian as well as Muslim patrons appreciated the Mosul style and decoration. Yet, the large number of Christian scenes in this piece is unusual. The hammered brass relief depicts the Madonna and Child Enthroned in the central medallion. Three scenes from the life of Christ surround the medallion: the Nativity and the Presentation in the Temple from the infancy narratives, and Christ's Entry into Jerusalem. The figures are characteristically medieval: they are flattened and somewhat elongated to conform to the shape in which they are placed, and the most important one is placed in the center of each figural area. The middle band contains an inscription which is illegible, for the letters have been transformed into revelers. It reminds us of a medieval manuscript illumination which gets so ornate, organic, and even figural, that the text following it is difficult to read. Probably this inscription is a message of good wishes. The underside

depicts a series of twenty-five pointed arches, each with a haloed figure, including an angel, a warrior saint, and a praying figure. Nine horsemen parade in a counterclockwise direction in the central ring.

This object is one of seventeen pieces, collected in museums today, of similar metalwork that features Christian narratives. A few of these are inscribed to Muslim rulers. Was this canteen created for a local Christian in Syria or Iraq or for a Muslim patron interested in the Christian stories? The canteen's superior quality and excellent preservation—it was discovered in 1845 in the collection of an Italian prince—suggest that it was created for the crusader nobility who settled in Syria and Palestine after the First Crusade in 1095-1099. The nouveau-riche Crusaders, competing with the wealth of the Muslim courts, commissioned objects like this as exotic souvenirs of the Holy Land. By 1262 many of the Mosul craftsmen had migrated east to territories controlled by Muslim slave soldiers, the Mamluks, where there were interspersed Crusader states that often housed visiting pilgrims.

This is a fine example of how works of art can allow cultures to learn from one another new techniques, conceptions of beauty, and even interpretations of shared religious narratives. The canteen was not maintained in such fine condition without considerable care; surely its artistry was appreciated by both Muslims and Christians in the Islamic world beginning from the thirteenth century.

#### **NOTE**

My interpretation of the canteen follows Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair, *Islamic Arts* (New York: Phaidon, 1997), 275-276.

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