



Pyxis of al-Mughira, Umayyad, c. 968 CE, ivory

1) Stokstad, Marilyn and Michael W. Cothren. *Art History*, 5th ed. Boston: Pearson, 2014. pp. 268-9

In 750 the Abbasid clan replaced the Umayyads in a coup d'état, ruling as caliphs until 1258 from Baghdad, in Iraq. Their long and cosmopolitan reign saw achievements in medicine, mathematics, the natural sciences, philosophy, literature, music, and art. They were generally tolerant of the ethnically diverse populations in the territories they subjugated, and they admired the past achievements of Roman civilization as well as the living traditions of Byzantium, Persia, India, and China, freely borrowing artistic techniques and styles from all of them.

In the tenth century, the Islamic world split into separate kingdoms ruled by independent caliphs. In addition to the Abbasids of Iraq, there was a Fatimid Shi'ite caliph ruling Tunisia and Egypt, and a descendant of the Umayyads ruling Spain and Portugal (together then known as al-Andalus). The Islamic world did not reunite under the myriad [of] dynasties who thereafter ruled from northern Africa to Asia, but loss in unity and was gain to artistic diversity.

2) Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis, "Pyxis of al-Mughira," in Smarthistory, August 8, 2015, accessed September 18, 2016, <http://smarthistory.org/pyxis-of-al-mughira/>

A pyxis is a cylindrical box used for cosmetics. Now, imagine a room in a palace where this beautifully carved ivory container is given a central place. The luxurious box sits open. Inside are small silver containers of perfume, also left open so that their sweet-smelling aromas could waft through the room, gently scenting the air. This particular pyxis was a gift to the then-eighteen-year-old al-Mughira, the son of a caliph, perhaps as a coming-of-age present.

Since the twilight years of the Roman Empire, carved ivory objects had been important elements of the artistic canon of the Mediterranean. Ivory was durable, smooth, elegant, and easily carved, making it highly desirable for the creation of diptychs, pyxides (the plural of pyxis), and icons that could serve as

single panels or could be combined into diptychs or triptychs during the Byzantine Empire. Highly portable, they were often given as gifts.

3) Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis, "Pyxis of al-Mughira," in Smarthistory, August 8, 2015, accessed September 18, 2016, <http://smarthistory.org/pyxis-of-al-mughira/>

The *Pyxis of al-Mughira* is decorated with four eight-lobed medallions which are surrounded by figures and animals that include falconers, wrestlers, griffons, peacocks, birds, goats and animals to be hunted. Each medallion has princely iconography.

The medallion above shows two men collecting eggs from the nests of falcons, a symbol of Umayyad legitimacy.

4) Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis, "Pyxis of al-Mughira," in Smarthistory, August 8, 2015, accessed September 18, 2016, <http://smarthistory.org/pyxis-of-al-mughira/>

In Al-Andalus, ivory objects, including Pyxides, were bestowed upon members of the royal family, specifically sons, wives and daughters on important or memorable occasions, such as a marriage, birth or coming of age; later they were given as gifts to important allies.

Another medallion shows lions attacking two bulls. As in Arabic poetry, these lions symbolize the victorious (in this case, perhaps the Umayyads). Islamic art is not strictly speaking aniconic (aniconic-the absence of human figures). Human and animal figures played a vital part in iconography. We see them here in this pyxis, which some scholars (including those at the Louvre), have interpreted as expressing the political authority and legitimacy of Umayyad Caliphs (as opposed to the Abbasid Caliphs, who ruled in Baghdad).

5) Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis, "Pyxis of al-Mughira," in Smarthistory, August 8, 2015, accessed September 18, 2016, <http://smarthistory.org/pyxis-of-al-mughira/>

An Arabic inscription in the kufic script runs around the base of the lid and reads: "God's blessing, favors, joy, beatitude to al-Mughira son of the Commander of the faithful, may God have mercy upon him, in the year 357."

This medallion centers around a lute player flanked by two figures, one of whom holds the braided scepter and flask of the Umayyads, while the other holds a fan. Presumably the man with the scepter and flask symbolizes the Umayyad Caliph, and the figure with the fan, the Abbasids.

The iconography may have had a further specific message to al-Mughira. After the death of his brother, al-Hakam II, al-Mughira may have been a threat to Hisham II (r. 976-1013) and he was executed (along with his supporters). While al-Mughira met an unfortunate end, the beauty of his pyxis ensured its survival.

6) Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis, "Pyxis of al-Mughira," in Smarthistory, August 8, 2015, accessed September 18, 2016, <http://smarthistory.org/pyxis-of-al-mughira/>

This final scene shows men on horseback date-picking. The date-palm, found primarily in the Middle East and North Africa, may allude to the lost lands of the East (the lands under Abbasid control). This too was a theme of Umayyad poetry. The use of visual imagery which is also found in the poetry of the era demonstrates that these two art forms were in communication.

7) Dodds, Jerrilyn Denise, ed. *Al Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992. pp. 192, 196

One of a series of Cordoban pyxides with domed covers from Madinat al-Zahra/Cordoba, this container, or huqqa, has a lid that was once topped by a knob. The domical cover is unique to the tenth-century Spanish series that include the present pyxis and is probably more wasteful of ivory than the flat one.

The domical shape of the cover turns the pyxis into a miniature piece of architecture. The architectural aspects of its form are not as fully developed as those of the later Braga pyxis, where they are accentuated by the framing of the figures in the arcades. In fact, the entire Braga pyxis could have been considered a pavilion. The polylobed frames of the medallions of the present pyxis do, however, recall the polylobed arches of Madinat al-Zahra and Cordoba. Late Roman and medieval objects from the Mediterranean and western Europe in the form of miniature architecture are well known. Examples survive rendered as Christian reliquaries and, notably, as containers for aromatic substances from both religious and secular contexts.
