

PRESS RELEASE

William Morris & Art from the Islamic World
9 November 2024 to 9 March 2025



This autumn, William Morris Gallery in Walthamstow will present the first exhibition on the influence of art from the Islamic world on William Morris (1834-1896), one of Britain's most important 19th-century designers and thinkers. A principal founder of the Arts and Crafts Movement, Morris was responsible for producing hundreds of patterns for wallpapers, furnishing fabrics, carpets and embroideries, helping to introduce a new aesthetic into British interiors. While it has long been acknowledged that Morris was inspired by Islamic art, this will be the first exhibition to explore this important aspect of his artistic journey in depth.

Alongside his own iconic designs, outstanding examples of Islamic textiles, ceramics, metalwork and manuscripts from Morris's personal collection – now belonging to major UK institutions including the British Library, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery and the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge – will be brought together for the first time to reveal the wider impacts of these objects, their designs and impressions on Morris's creative output.

Featuring over 60 works, the exhibition will demonstrate how some of Morris's best-known designs such as *Flower Garden* (1879), *Wild Tulip* and *Granada* (1884) were directly inspired by Islamic surface design and its technical application. The exhibition is made possible thanks to funding from The National Lottery Heritage Fund.

Ranging from popular 19th-century tourist merchandise to rare artefacts of historical significance, Morris's collection of Islamic art reveals the importance of contributions of various cultures to the evolution of his design and craftsmanship. *William Morris & Art from the Islamic World* will mark the first time many of these works have been exhibited since his death. Highlights will include a group of 17th to 19th-century Turkish and Iranian textiles on loan from Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, which have not been shown publicly until now. Among these textiles will be a large 17th-century Ottoman *çatma* or velvet hanging which was used as the pall for Morris's coffin. This work is not only an excellent example of textile art, but also reflects the deep personal significance it had for both Morris and his family.

Within his lifetime, William Morris was known as one of the leading British experts on Islamic textiles. *William Morris & Art from the Islamic World* will show how he helped to bring art from Turkey, Syria and Iran to a British public by lecturing widely on the subject and advising the V&A on the building of its collection as an 'Art Referee', including the purchase of the famous V&A 'Ardabil carpet' – the world's oldest dated carpet and one of the largest and historically important.

Aside from textiles, the exhibition will showcase works from Morris's collection including a 17th-century illustrated manuscript of the Iranian epic poem the *Shahnameh*, and beautiful examples of Syrian inlaid metalwork and Turkish Iznik ceramics with eye-catching patterns and vibrant hues which greatly influenced European taste. Several of the objects, including the brass incense burner shaped in the form of a peacock, carpets and inlaid metalwork feature in original photos of Morris's home and will be brought together to reveal how he displayed them in his own interiors. Morris took pleasure in living with the objects from his collection within his own domestic space – he hung an Iranian carpet from the ceiling at Kelmscott House in Hammersmith and covered tables with Turkish rugs – much to the curiosity of his Victorian visitors.

Through new research, the exhibition will reveal the role of Morris's youngest daughter May in building and disseminating the family's collection of art from the Islamic world. May Morris (1862-1938) was an embroiderer and textile designer. Like her father, May had a professional interest in textiles from the Islamic world, which she collected and wrote about from the 1880s. While her father never travelled outside of Europe, May spent time in Egypt and Morocco, collecting textiles and objects, which will be presented within the exhibition alongside her own embroideries. After her father's death, May was influential in the eventual distribution of the family's collection to public museums, and for our understanding of what her father considered a significant work. This exhibition sets out to enrich our appreciation of Morris's work and broaden our understanding of the underlying influences of this quintessentially 'British' designer.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a new publication, *Tulips and Peacocks: William Morris and Art from the Islamic World* (Yale University Press).

William Morris & Art from the Islamic World is curated by Rowan Bain, principal curator of the William Morris Gallery, and Qaisra M. Khan, Curator of Islamic Art.

William Morris & Art from the Islamic World is made possible with the National Heritage Lottery Fund and support from the Garfield Weston Foundation.

NOTES TO EDITORS

Images

Left: Peacock, c.1870, Iran, possibly Isfahan (Qajar), hollow brass with pierced decoration and turquoise. © The Society of Antiquaries of London (Kelmscott Manor)
Right: *Wild Tulip*, 1884, designed by William Morris for Morris & Co., block-printed wallpaper. © William Morris Gallery, London Borough of Waltham Forest

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The exhibition will be on view from 9 November 2024 to 9 March 2025.

Gallery opening hours are Tuesday to Sunday, 10am – 5pm; Admission free (suggested £5 donation).

About the William Morris Gallery

Owned and run by Waltham Forest Council, the William Morris Gallery is the only public Gallery devoted to William Morris: designer, craftsman and radical socialist. Housed in the Grade II* listed building that was Morris's family home from 1848 to 1856, it displays the world's largest collection of his work. In recent years the Gallery has developed an ambitious programme of contemporary and historical exhibitions by artists including Jeremy Deller, Yinka Shonibare CBE, Althea McNish and May Morris. Other special exhibitions have explored 20th-century political posters, African textiles and the Japanese folk craft movement.

William Morris Gallery
Forest Road London
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www.wmgallery.org.uk

About the National Lottery Heritage Fund

Our vision is for heritage to be valued, cared for and sustained for everyone, now and in the future. That's why as the largest funder for the UK's heritage we are dedicated to supporting projects that connect people and communities to heritage, as set out in our strategic plan, Heritage 2033. Heritage can be anything from the past that people value and want to pass on to future generations. We believe in the power of heritage to ignite the imagination, offer joy and inspiration, and to build pride in place and connection to the past. Over the next 10 years, we aim to invest £3.6billion raised for good causes by National Lottery players to make a decisive difference for people, places and communities.

About the Garfield Weston Foundation

Established in 1958, the Garfield Weston Foundation is a family-founded grant-maker that gives money to support a wide variety of charities across the UK. The Foundation's funding comes from an endowment of shares in the Weston family business – a successful model that still exists today. The Weston family have a consistent aim. The more successful the family businesses, the more money the Foundation can donate.

Each year the Foundation gives away its income and donations have continued to grow. Since it was established it has donated over £1.5 billion, of which over half has been given away in the past ten years. In the most recent financial year the Foundation gave away over £100 million to just under 1,800 charities across the UK.



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