

Exhibition: *Dining with the Sultan: The Fine Art of Feasting*

Dates: December 17, 2023–August 4, 2024

Location: Resnick Pavilion



(Image captions on page 3)

(Los Angeles, CA—November 27, 2023) The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) presents *Dining with the Sultan: The Fine Art of Feasting*, the first exhibition to explore Islamic art in the context of its associated culinary traditions. Featuring some 250 works from 30 public and private collections across the U.S., Europe, and the Middle East, the exhibition celebrates how gustatory discernment was a fundamental activity at the great Islamic courts.

A fascination with gourmet culture in Islamic lands can be traced back to ninth-century Baghdad. By the 10th century, there was already a vast body of literature on food and its preparation and enjoyment. *Dining with the Sultan* explores a vast range of objects related to the sourcing, preparation, serving, and enjoyment of food, from recipe manuscripts and crockery to dining apparel and opulent tableware.

To resituate these artworks in their original context of fine dining, the multisensory exhibition surrounds visitors with the sights, sounds, smells, and textures of historical Islamic foodways. *Dining with the Sultan's* immersive installations include LACMA's 18th-century Damascus reception room, which will be on view for the first time in the U.S. following its decade-long conservation. This exhibition is curated by Linda Komaroff, Department Head and Curator, Art of the Middle East, at LACMA.

“For many, if not most of us, our earliest encounter with another culture is not its art, literature, or history but rather its cuisine,” said Komaroff. “Through the prism of our own modern-day fascination with gastronomy, the history of Islamic food culture offers us a powerful conduit for better appreciating and understanding fine art.”

“*Dining with the Sultan* is a major exhibition of Islamic art that breaks new ground in its emphasis on a practice shared by all cultures—feasting,” said Michael Govan, LACMA CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director. “This exhibition also marks the first time that the *Damascus Room* will be accessible to U.S. audiences and we are excited to share this work from the museum’s permanent collection.”

LACMA will also present a companion exhibition at Charles White Elementary School. On view January 20–August 10, 2024, *Dining with the Sultan at Charles White Elementary School* features 60 works from LACMA’s collection of Islamic art and addresses the universal importance of food through Islamic art and dining culture. The exhibition is co-curated by Sandra Williams, Assistant Curator, and Shadi Shafiei, Research Assistant, Art of the Middle East, at LACMA.

Exhibition Highlights

Dining with the Sultan brings together a rich array of tableware, preparatory vessels, textiles, instruments, manuscripts, illustrations, paintings, and other objects, using nine thematic sections that each examine an aspect or influence in Islamic food culture over time. These sections include **Continuity and Change: Royal Cuisine and Etiquette from the Late Antique to Early Islamic Courts; Storing and Serving Potable Water; Prefacing the Feast: Sourcing and Preparation; Outdoor Feasting and Picnicking; From the Pharmacy: Eating for Health; Music and Entertainment; Dressing for Dinner; Dining Across Cultures: China, Islamic Lands, and Italy; and Coffee Culture.**

The presentation also features three special installation sections. This includes a virtual meal experience in which visitors are invited to sit on floor cushions at a traditional **Sufra** and feast their eyes on a rotation of six dishes based on historical recipes updated and prepared by Iranian American chef, restaurateur, and author Najmieh Batmanglij. The works of art displayed nearby demonstrate the great variety and diversity of tableware, utensils, and dining accessories, such as napkins and hand-washing vessels, associated with a fine feast.

In addition, visitors can step into the ***Damascus Room*** (1766–67 CE / AH 1180), a lavishly decorated reception room from a late Ottoman home, which features beautifully painted and carved wood walls, an intricately inlaid stone wall fountain, and an ornate arch formed of colorful plaster voussoirs. One of the best-preserved examples of its kind, this interior documents contemporaneous dining traditions and the role these spaces played not only in hospitality and feasting but in the display of the related tableware.

Finally, to carry the exploration of traditional food culture in Islamic lands through to the present day and to demonstrate its universality, the exhibition presents a newly commissioned multimedia installation by **Sadik Kwaish Alfraji**. The artist visualizes and makes tangible recollections of his mother’s homemade bread, down to its taste,

smell, and touch. He captures universal familial experiences, such as the way shared food brings individuals together, even though the emotional impact is often bittersweet—like photos in an old family album, depicting a moment to which there is no going back.

Exhibition Catalogue

The exhibition catalogue is co-published by LACMA and DelMonico Books/D.A.P. Organized like the menu for an elaborate feast, the book offers an introduction to Islamic art and culture through the universal lens of fine dining and features historical recipes for today's gourmands. Included are texts by Valentina Bruccoleri, Sinem Arcak Casale, Touraj Daryaee, Ashley Dimmig, Maryam Ekhtiar, Farshid Emami, Jessica Hallett, Katherine E. Kasdorf, Linda Komaroff, Deborah L. Krohn, Zoe S. Kwok, Paulina B. Lewicka, Daniel Newman, Charles Perry, Helen Pfeifer, Amir Hosein Pourjavady, Hedda Reindl-Kiel, Khodadad Rezakhani, Shadi Shafiei, Ursula Sims-Williams, Wheeler M. Thackston, Ömür Tufan, Neha Vermani, Joseph Leonardo Vignone, and Sandra Williams.

Credit: This exhibition was organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

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Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this exhibition do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

About LACMA: Located on the Pacific Rim, LACMA is the largest art museum in the western United States, with a collection of nearly 152,000 objects that illuminate 6,000 years of artistic expression across the globe. Committed to showcasing a multitude of art histories, LACMA exhibits and interprets works of art from new and unexpected points of view that are informed by the region's rich cultural heritage and diverse population. LACMA's spirit of experimentation is reflected in its work with artists, technologists, and thought leaders as well as in its regional, national, and global partnerships to share collections and programs, create pioneering initiatives, and engage new audiences.

Location: 5905 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA, 90036. lacma.org

Image captions: (Left) *Tray cover*, 18th–19th century, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by Songul Afacan Yaprak and Tolga Yaprak in loving memory of Mazhar Afacan, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA; (Center) *Hormuz Forces His High Priest to Eat Poisoned Food, Page from a Manuscript of the Shahnama (Book of Kings) of Firdawsi* (detail), Iran, Shiraz, c. 1485–95, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Nasli M. Heeramaneck Collection, gift of Joan Palevsky, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA; (Right) *Dish with Quails*, Iran, late 17th–early 18th century, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, gift of Gerald Reitlinger, 1978, EA1978.1783, photo © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

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