



Much of this store of 300 Qajar works – one of the finest outside Iran – was donated by Charles Wilkinson, a curator at the museum from 1956 to 1974.

DYNASTIC ROOTS

The museum's ties to the region date back nearly to its founding in 1897. Between 1906 and 1908, it sponsored an expedition that dug at early sites in southern Egypt and yielded many of its most important works, such as the iconic *Bird Lady*, a pre-dynastic figurine of a woman and one of the earliest known representations of a human being from Egypt. But it was the Brooklyn's acquisition over the course of 30 years, beginning in 1916, of the collection of the pioneering American Egyptologist Charles Edwin Wilbour that perhaps did the most to shape the museum's holdings in this area. The acquisition not only brought with it a vast range of Egyptian antiquities – everything from statuary to

papyrus documents – but also led to the donation by Wilbour's heirs of his professional library and the establishment of a financial endowment in his memory. The Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund made possible the Wilbour Library of Egyptology, one of the best of its kind, as well as a curatorial department for Ancient Egyptian art and the further acquisition of Egyptian antiquities, such as the purchase of more than 2000 objects from the New York Historical Society in 1948.

Other outstanding Egyptian pieces include the *Wilbour Plaque* (Charles Wilbour excavated it in 1881), a limestone relief that depicts King Akhenaten and Nefertiti and was used as a model for other sculptors. Dating to sometime between 1352 and 1336 BCE, it remains a striking

Above: Situ Studio. *ReOrder*. 2011. Umbrella fabric. Variable dimensions. Image courtesy Keith Sarchis.

Facing page: Above: Sadegh Tirafkan. *Loss of Identity* # 2. 2007. Digital photo collage. 92 x 74 cm. Image courtesy Eternad Gallery, Dubai.

Below: Pouran Juchi. *Prayer Stone* 5. 2009. Charcoal pencil and ink on Okawara Paper. 100.3 x 100.3 cm.

example of the graphic stone carving style of the late Amarna period. Another significant work is the *Statuette of Queen Ankhnesmeryre II and her Son, Pepy II*. The sleek alabaster sculpture, which has the boy king sitting on his mother's lap, prefigures not only Egyptian goddess-king imagery but also the Christian iconography of Madonna and child.

After a decade of planning, many of these works were reinstalled in 2003 in an exhibition titled *Egypt Reborn*. The redesigned display, which added three galleries to make a total of seven, allowed the museum to present some 1600 objects, from the pre-dynastic to the Roman period, and to trace the entire history of Egyptian art as well as explore cultural themes like women's roles, temples and tombs, and art and communication. Bleiberg says he hopes the galleries will help dispel what he describes as a commonly held misconception that Egyptian art changed little from era to era.

REVAMPED AND REVEALED

Egyptian art is not the only work from the Middle East that recently found itself in better quarters. In 2007 the museum followed *Egypt Reborn* with a reinstallation of key pieces from its Islamic art collection, which includes some 2000 objects spanning 13 centuries and several continents. "There were some amazing works in those galleries, but people just sort of walked past them," says Ladan Akbarnia, the museum's Hagop Kevorkian Associate Curator of Islamic Art. After all, she adds, the galleries hadn't really changed their appearance in 30 years. Plus, she says, their pale walls had the effect of washing out what was in the vitrines. No matter how luminous the ceramics or lush the paintings, they just "didn't pop". Akbarnia oversaw what she jokingly refers to as the "Botox-ing" of the Islamic galleries – "we just couldn't afford a full-on face lift" – a process that has seen the walls painted a deep blue and added touches like frosted glass window panels, whose decorative patterns are meant to evoke the tracery of Islamic architecture.

The overhaul also restored one of the collection's crown jewels, *Battle of Karbala*, a turn-of-the-20th century coffeehouse painting which was used as the backdrop for processional and theatrical re-enactments of critical religious scenes. The oil-on-canvas painting, which commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, grandson of the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) and the third *imam*, or leader, of the Shi'ite Muslims, is today a centerpiece of the galleries. It's also one of the highlights of the museum's top-flight collection of art from Iran's Qajar dynasty, which stretched from the late 18th century to the early 20th century. As with *Battle of Karbala*, in which Hussain's half-brother



her first acts as curator there was spearheading the 2007 acquisition of *Loss of Our Identity*, a photo-collage by the Iranian artist Sadegh Tirafkan (*Canvas 5.3*), whose work is also in the collections of the British Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Contemporary Art. The work depicts a photo of a young man with iPod-style ear-buds dangling over his shoulders, his face partially obscured by the superimposed image of a lithograph of a battle scene from a Qajar-period book. Akbarnia recalled how she knew instantly that it would mesh perfectly with the rest of the collection and provoke connections between art from the past and the present.

That dialogue ran through the 2009 exhibit *Light of the Sufis: The Mystical Arts of Islam*, in which Akbarnia mixed centuries-old objects with the work of Contemporary artists,

including *Fragments of Light II*, which incorporates the writings of Rumi, by Kelly Driscoll, an American Sufi. Pouran Jinchi (*Canvas 5.5*), the Iranian-born New York artist, was also represented by a shimmering charcoal, pencil and ink rubbing of a prayer stone, which the museum purchased for its permanent collection later that year. Akbarnia admits that part of the appeal of new work is that it is much more accessible than antiquities. "It doesn't have the same baggage attached," she says, referring to the dubious provenance of so many ancient objects.

However, Akbarnia is quick to add that Contemporary Islamic art brings its own set of challenges. "One of the dangers of looking at this material as part of an Islamic collection is that you run the risk of pigeon-holing these artists' work when they should really be viewed as part of a wider, contemporary circuit," she says. And in

Below:

Left: Judy Chicago. *The Dinner Party*. 1974-79. Ceramic, porcelain and textile. 1463 x 1463 cm. Gift of The Elizabeth A Sackler Foundation.

Right: Abbas Al-Musavi. *Battle of Karbala*. Late 19th-early 20th century. Oil on canvas. 182.9 x 299.7 cm. Gift of K Thomas Elghanayan in honour of Nourollah Elghanayan.

