

## Dining with the Sultan: The Fine Art of Feasting

This supplement is produced in conjunction with *Dining with the Sultan: The Fine Art of Feasting* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, December 17, 2023–August 4, 2024.

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# Exhibition Introduction

For many, if not most of us, our earliest encounter with another culture is not its art, literature, or history but rather its cuisine. At LACMA, we believe this existing curiosity and appetite for alternative food customs creates the opportunity to direct our audience's gaze beyond the West to other and equally significant artistic traditions. *Dining with the Sultan* is the first exhibition to explore Islamic visual culture in the context of its related culinary and dining traditions.

The allure of food is hardly unique to historical Islamic lands, but rather the act of coming together for a meal is a practice prized by all cultures. Food defines us—we are what we eat—and, by extension, how, when, why, and with whom we dine helps to characterize our cultural, ethnic, socio-economic, and religious identities. In today's world, even as we contemplate issues of sustainability and global food security, we simultaneously and somewhat paradoxically enjoy an ever-expanding fascination with the culinary arts of deluxe comestibles.

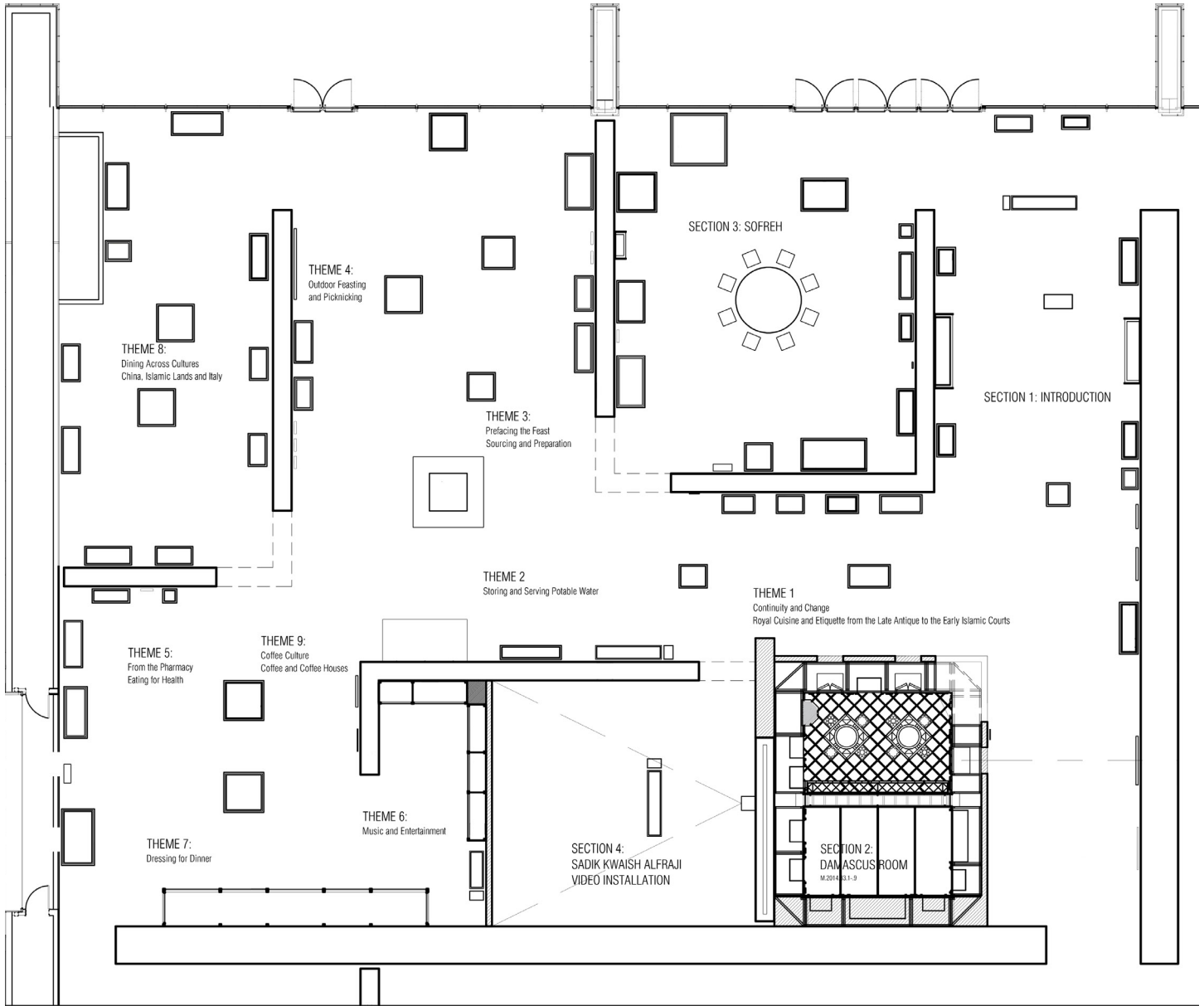
The history of food culture in Islamic lands can be viewed through the prism of our own modern-day fascination with gastronomy. The inclusion here of historical recipes updated for today's gourmards is intended to create a connection not only to another food tradition but to the material culture associated with it. Affiliated tablewares were more than static luxury items nowadays displayed in art museums. Rather, when viewed within the context of fine dining, they take on a more active role, reminding us of their former culinary lives.

In Islamic lands the culinary arts were first transformed in ninth-century Baghdad; by the tenth century, there was already a vast body of literature on food and its preparation, enjoyment, and medicinal uses, of which only a fraction remains. What survives are the objects associated with dining and the sourcing, preparation, serving, and consumption of food, the focus of this exhibition.

**Linda Komaroff**

Curator of Islamic Art and Department Head, Art of the Middle East

# Exhibition Floor Plan



# Installation Images





# Exhibition Design

For *Dining with the Sultan*, we used an existing contemporary architecture language. We wanted the artwork, historic elements, and exhibition furniture to connect visitors with feasting from the past to now. From the beginning, there was a clear understanding of what the color palette would be: white walls and contrasting, clean dark casework. This contrast balanced the contemporary environment with historic elements and architecture. We encapsulated the historic Damascus Room with the white wall, a contemporary gallery type. Sadik Awaish Alfradi's video installation further reinforced these connections of past generations to today. The contemporary work weaves cooking, tradition, history, emotion, and family together. We incorporated scent boxes to connect visitors in a layered way to the exhibition materials. While in the space celebrating coffee, a visitor could open a scent box and get a sniff of coffee to trigger a visceral experience of the exhibition. The sufra table didactic brought visitors into the feasting experience by unveiling a feast in front of them. In the sufra gallery space, visitors were surrounded by materials used during the event, placed in order of the feast along the perimeter. Ultimately, people still eat, people still sit, and people still gather.

There were 250 artworks throughout the exhibition, positioned to support the curator's narrative and viewing intent. Exhibition furniture helped posit the objects in space to support these stories. Some objects were placed at table height, laid flat and low, in the center of the galleries. This height and placement enabled visitors to walk around and look down at them. The visitors could experience feasting objects as if originally laid out on a table (even though the table, in this context, would be lower). We also had objects at our typical viewing height. These objects were placed so visitors could study the objects' details and other aspects. Many of the higher cases were placed along the perimeter of the galleries.

To bring the exhibition home, we even incorporated recipes into the galleries and exhibition catalogue, to encourage people to carry on the feasting tradition and taste what they saw at the museum.

**Victoria Turkel Behner**

Associate Director, Exhibition Design and Production

# Ewer and Bowl

(both 10th century)

In bringing together 250 works of art for *Dining with the Sultan*, there were bound to be discoveries I could make only once we placed the physical objects side by side—for example, two ceramic vessels from the tenth-century eastern Iranian world, a small ewer and a similarly sized bowl. Both are made of earthenware disguised and beautified through the application of a white slip; they emulate imported Chinese stoneware but are decorated with Arabic inscriptions starkly executed in black. Their analogous texts invite the user to drink or eat from them.

The parallel texts are not what led me to conclude that they were made in the same workshop. Rather it was the calligraphic style of their inscriptions: the nuanced and stylized rendering of the letters is identical. Throughout my years of research and writing the exhibition catalogue, I had avoided the notion that such ceramics were made as sets—much like modern Western tableware—but, at least in this instance, that seems a strong possibility.

**Linda Komaroff**



# ***A Thread of Light Between My Mother's Fingers and Heaven* (2023) by Sadik Kwaish Alfraji**

(b. 1960, Baghdad, Iraq, active Netherlands)

LACMA commissioned a piece by Sadik Kwaish Alfraji for this exhibition. Here, the artist reflects on seeing his new work in the exhibition space.

How do dining rituals at home, which are strongly and deeply engraved in our memory, meet with treasures of Islamic art on the same subject? How do family gatherings every day over a mother's warm bread, baked with love, meet with historical objects related to dining that seem to come from another world—the world of precious artwork and museums?

It feels like a familiar and intimate world as if it secretly extends to my small world—home and family and my mother's bread, touched by her slender fingers and kneaded by her sacred hand. That was what came to my mind as I viewed my work in the midst of those treasures. Despite the differences in time and geography, I felt my mother's breath filling her picture and floating in LACMA's gallery space and between the pages of the manuscripts.

My mother was there and I was very happy about that.

**Sadik Kwaish Alfraji**





## Three Blue-and-White Dishes

My experience of viewing the exhibition *Dining with the Sultan* at LACMA enhanced my understanding of the shared elements of ceramic tableware from diverse cultures in both time and space. In one case, three blue-and-white dishes tell the story of the transference of decorative motifs and material strategies between Ming China, Renaissance Italy, and Ottoman Turkey. The Chinese dish, made of hard and durable porcelain, features a pattern of interlaced flowers on a white ground. An elegant notched border encircles the central floral design. The Italian dish is made of maiolica, or tin-glazed earthenware, and is thicker and heavier, its off-white color betraying the humbler material and lower firing temperature. The enlarged rim frames an inner bowl depicting a ship reminiscent of a carrack, a kind of vessel used for long-distance sea travel between Europe and Asia by the Spanish and Portuguese during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The Turkish dish, made of fritware, more closely follows the decoration on the Ming dish, with a centralized floral pattern and a minimal rim. Both the Italian and Turkish objects may be understood as emulations of Chinese porcelain, which was highly prized for its qualities of transparency and strength, and which may have arrived in Europe via a ship such as the one on the Italian dish. The juxtaposition of these related pieces in the exhibition demonstrates the lure of porcelain, its glistening finish highly revered across Asia and Europe, though the specific formula for its creation was not understood in Europe until the early eighteenth century.

**Deborah L. Krohn**

Associate Professor and Chair of Academic Programs,  
Bard Graduate Center, New York



## Selected press clippings

“To see such pleasing and artistically made objects many hundreds of years old, reminds us that in offering hospitality to another, in sharing a meal, in making and using well-crafted objects to serve and eat with, we are reminded of the human capacity for beauty. It is a reminder worth seeing.”  
— “Dining with the Sultan: The Fine Art of Feasting,” *Forbes*, January 10, 2024

“Dining with the Sultan ventures beyond museum objects, offering visitors a sensory glimpse, if you will, of the splendor of the Islamic feast.”  
— “Senses Awakened: Dining With The Sultan: The Fine Art Of Feasting,” *Antiques and the Arts Weekly*, January 16, 2024

“As much as the objects in the exhibition convey culinary traditions unique to Islamic cultures, they also depict networks of aesthetic and cultural exchange.”  
— “New Show of Islamic Art Explores the Pleasure of Eating Together,” *Hyperallergic*, December 19, 2023  
<https://hyperallergic.com/862806/new-show-of-islamic-art-at-lacma-explores-the-pleasure-of-eating-together>

“The Damascus Room anchors *Dining with the Sultan: The Fine Art of Feasting*, a large and often exquisite survey of some 250 Islamic decorative arts that opens at LACMA this weekend. The objects are mostly vessels related to the storage, preparation and consumption of food—primarily from Syria, Iran, Turkey and other parts of the Middle East, but with examples from as far afield as Spain and China that show the influences of the often luxurious designs.”  
— “Essential Arts: Newsletter Dispatch from Christopher Knight,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 16, 2023

# Image Credits

1: Cover of *Dining with the Sultan* exhibition catalogue, showing detail of *Ni'matnāmah-i Nāṣirshāhi* (*Book of Delights*), India, late 15th century, the Oriental and India Office Collections of the British Library, London (IO Islamic 149 OR BL. Persian 149, fol. 40 b), photo © British Library Images

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4 (bottom): *Damascus Room*, AD 1766–67/AH 1180, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Conservation of the room was organized in partnership with the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture; additional conservation support was provided by the Friends of Heritage Preservation, © Museum Associates/LACMA, photography by Firooz Zahedi

8: © Sadik Kwaish Alfraji, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

