

EXHIBITION TEXT



# CROSSCURRENTS

Masterpieces of Mughal, Safavid, and Ottoman Art  
from the Musée du Louvre

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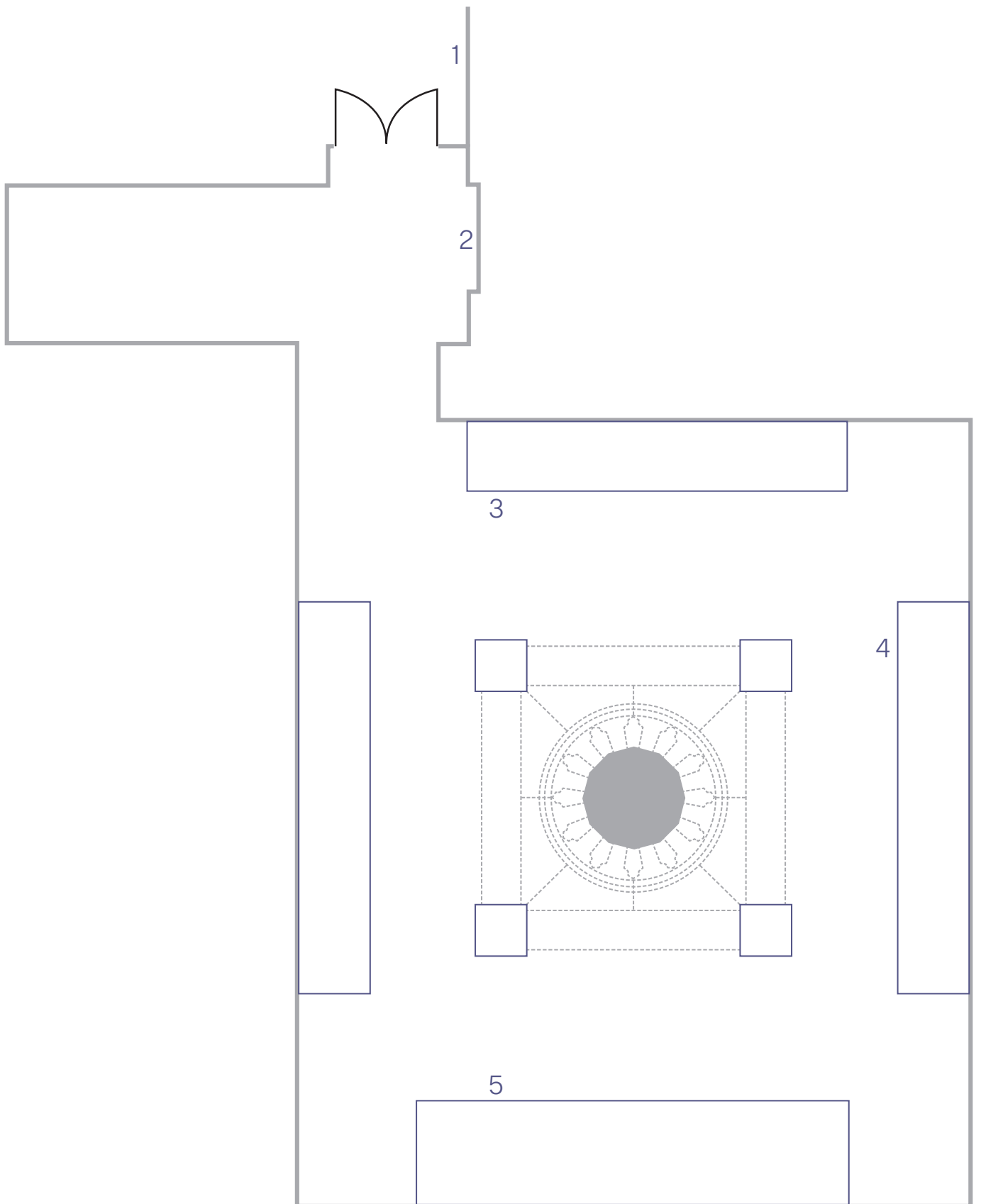


EXHIBITION ORGANISED BY  
THE MUSÉE DU LOUVRE, PARIS AND  
THE ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM, SINGAPORE

LOUVRE

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# Plan of the gallery



# 1 **Crosscurrents: Masterpieces of Mughal, Safavid, and Ottoman Art from the Musée du Louvre**

From the 16th to 18th century, the Mughal, Safavid, and Ottoman empires shaped a vast and interconnected region across Asia. As objects, materials, and people moved between these empires, styles and techniques were adapted and reworked, giving rise to shared visual languages alongside distinctive local traditions.

The exhibition unfolds across two levels. Level 2 explores Mughal India and Safavid Iran, while Level 3 focuses on the Ottoman world. The central staircase brings these strands together, with a map of the three empires and a panel introducing the design concepts behind the exhibition. As you explore these spaces, consider what the objects on display share and where they diverge. What feels familiar, and what is unexpected?

## 2 **Luxury of the Ottoman World (1299–1924)**

The Ottoman state emerged in 13th-century Anatolia as a frontier emirate on the borders of the Byzantine Empire. Over the following centuries, it expanded steadily across the Balkans and the eastern Mediterranean. The 1453 conquest of Constantinople marked a decisive turning point, establishing the Ottomans as an imperial power and transforming the city – renamed Istanbul – into their capital. Within a few decades, it was reshaped by mosques, palaces, and public buildings commissioned by the sultans and their courts.

### **Patrons of the arts**

The 16th century marked the zenith of the empire, which now spanned Eastern Europe, Anatolia, the Middle East, and North Africa. Istanbul and Cairo emerged as major urban centres, linked by extensive maritime and overland trade routes across the empire and beyond. While territorial expansion slowed in the 17th century, the Ottomans remained

a powerful and enduring presence until the early 20th century. Throughout this period, they were profound patrons of the arts, cultivating the production of books, textiles, and ceramics that today form the core of the Louvre's Islamic art collection.

### **3 Islamic Southeast Asia**

Today, Southeast Asia is home to around a quarter of the world's Muslim population, with majorities in Brunei, Malaysia, and Indonesia, and significant minorities elsewhere. Contacts with the Islamic world began early, evidenced by the discovery of a 9th-century Arab dhow off the coast of Sumatra – now on display in the Tang Shipwreck Gallery. By the late 13th century, these encounters contributed to the rise of the Samudra Pasai Sultanate in Aceh, the first Islamic kingdom in the region. Islam then spread gradually, reaching its widest extent between the 16th and 18th centuries.

## **Oceanic networks and courtly ties**

Merchants from the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent, particularly Gujarat, Bengal, and the Coromandel Coast, were key to this process. Many settled locally and forged ties through marriage. As rulers adopted Islam and took the title of sultan, courtly patronage reinforced new identities. Links extended across the Islamic world, exemplified by the 16th-century alliance between Aceh and the Ottoman Empire, sustaining the movement of people, objects, and ideas across oceans.

## **Local traditions, shared forms**

Islamic art in Southeast Asia emerged through adaptation rather than rupture. Earlier Hindu-Buddhist and animist traditions were reworked to suit new contexts, producing distinctive regional styles. Flowing vegetal forms such as the *okir* designs of the Philippines exemplify this process, transforming ancestral patterns into a distinct Islamic visual language.

## **4 Iznik ceramics**

From around 1470, Iznik potters produced high-quality stoneware that rivalled the brilliance and whiteness of Chinese porcelain. Blue-and-white decoration initially dominated their designs before a vibrant colour palette emerged in the mid-16th century. These ceramics reflect the ambitions of imperial patrons and a growing demand for luxury objects.

### **Evolving brilliance**

Iznik tableware was widely used across the Ottoman Empire and exported to Europe. Tile production also surged in the 16th century. Driven by court commissions for palaces and public monuments, these tiles evolved alongside tableware, developing a rich decorative repertoire and a wide range of colours.

## **5 Istanbul and the imperial court**

In the 16th century, a court-centred style based in Istanbul shaped artistic production

across the Ottoman Empire, with the imperial atelier serving as its creative centre. Here, court artists developed a distinct visual language, ensuring that everything from monumental tilework to manuscripts affirmed the sultan's authority.

### **Material grandeur**

Imperial patronage revolutionised luxury crafts, transforming metalwork and textiles into tools of power. Palace workshops specialised in *tombak* (gilded copper) and other precious metalwork, creating gold-inlaid vessels for the ruler's exclusive use, while imperial painters provided designs for the empire's renowned silks and velvets. This aesthetic control extended to the royal scriptorium, where refined *thuluth* calligraphy and illumination turned manuscripts into prized diplomatic gifts, projecting the court's power and the sultan's prestige.