EXHIBITION TEXT

CROSSCURRENTS

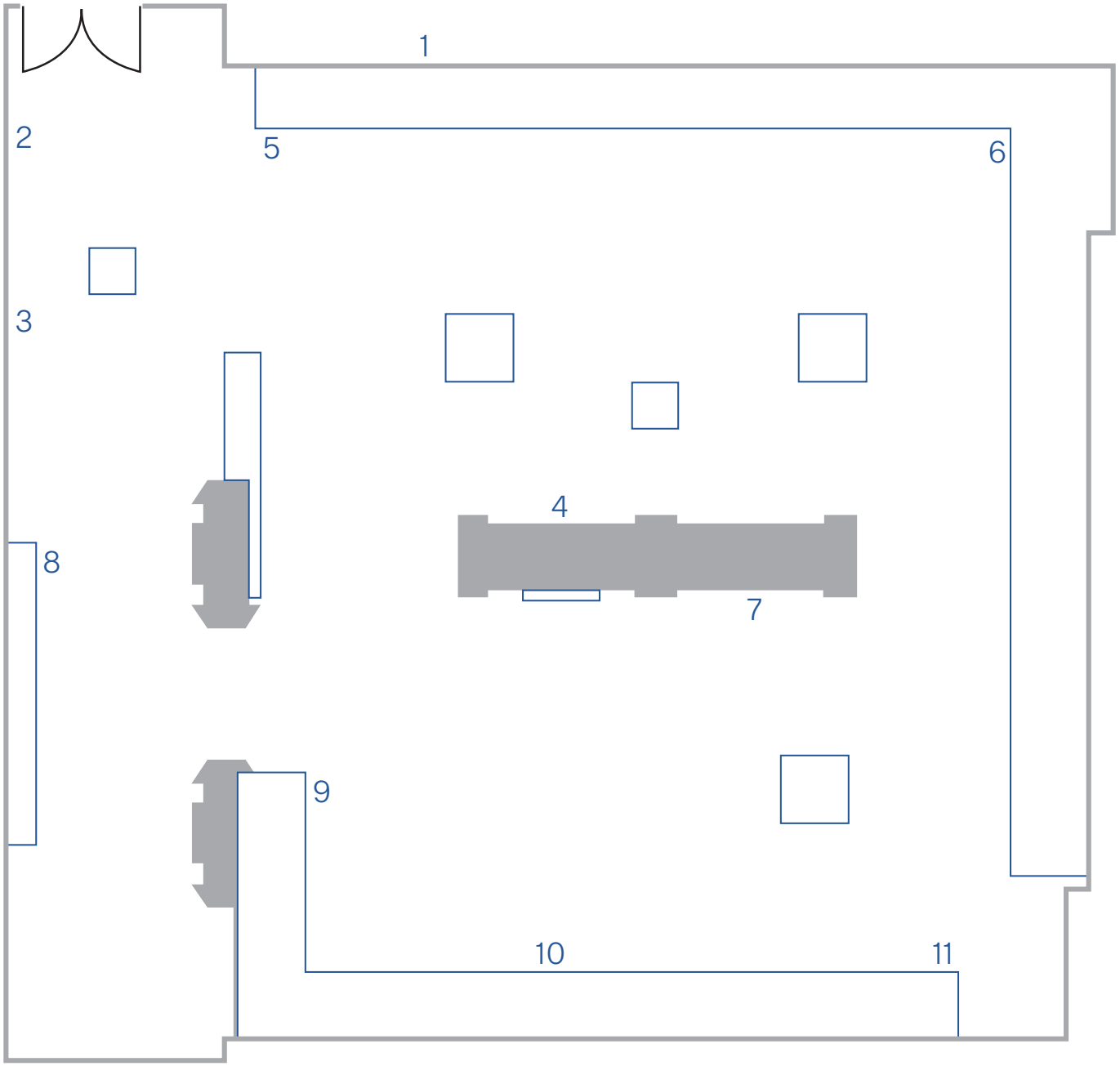
Masterpieces of Mughal, Safavid, and Ottoman Art from the Musée du Louvre

19 June 2026 – 24 Jan 2027

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

LOUVRE ACM

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. Enter the gallery on the right to explore Mughal India and Safavid Iran, then continue to Level 3 for 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 Crosscurrents: Masterpieces of Mughal, Safavid, and Ottoman Art from the Musée du Louvre

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From the 16th to 18th century, three great empires – the Mughals in India, Safavids in Iran, and Ottomans in Turkey – shaped a vast and interconnected world across Asia. This period marked the height of their influence, even as European expansion was reshaping global trade and politics. The artworks they produced projected authority, taste, and imperial ambition, giving visible form to power.

Empires in motion

Within and between these empires, artists engaged with a wide range of influences, developing distinctive courtly styles. Local traditions endured, even as shared visual languages emerged through contact. Far from being a periphery, Southeast Asia too, played an active role in these exchanges. Trade with the Middle East and the spread of Islam

supported the rise of mercantile sultanates such as Aceh, Banten, and Johor, where new artistic forms took shape.

Navigating the exhibition

This exhibition presents one hundred masterpieces from the Louvre, drawn from royal collections and later acquisitions. Journey through Mughal India and Safavid Iran in this gallery before continuing upstairs to the Ottoman world. Southeast Asian objects from ACM's collection are interwoven throughout, bringing these traditions into dialogue and revealing the crosscurrents that connected distant regions.

3 From royal palace to national museum

Originally a royal palace, the Louvre became a national museum in 1793 during the French Revolution. Its holdings were formed from royal collections built up from the 16th century onwards, alongside objects seized during the

Revolution and later acquisitions. Works from the Islamic world entered these collections early, initially displayed alongside European art before being grouped together in the late 19th century. In 2012, they were rehoused in a dedicated gallery designed by Rudy Ricciotti and Mario Bellini. Today, the Islamic art collection comprises over 20,000 works, spanning fourteen centuries, from Spain to India.

Royal patronage

Royal patronage played a central role in shaping these early holdings. Under Louis XIV (1638–1715), they expanded significantly through purchases from major collectors. Among the objects acquired were hardstone vessels carved from agate, jade, and rock crystal, some of which came from the Mughal and Ottoman worlds. Displayed in royal residences such as the Louvre and Versailles, these works were among the first from the Islamic world to enter the collections.

4 Splendour of Mughal India (1526–1858)

The Mughal dynasty emerged from a world shaped by movement across Asia – through trade, migration, conquest, and artistic exchange. It was founded in 1526 by Babur, a descendant of Timur and Genghis Khan. Defeating Ibrahim Lodi, the last ruler of the Delhi Sultanate, he laid the foundations for one of the world's great empires.

Golden age

Mughal art developed through the interaction of Persian court culture and diverse local traditions. The empire experienced a golden age under Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan in the 16th and 17th centuries, with the arts flourishing at court. Akbar strengthened and expanded the empire while adopting Persian as the administrative language, linking Mughal India more closely to the wider Islamic world.

Expansion and transformation

The empire reached its greatest extent under Aurangzeb in the late 17th century. In the 18th century, regional powers emerged and external pressures increased, including the 1738 invasion by Nader Shah, the Shah of Iran. The growing influence of the British East India Company reshaped the political landscape, culminating in the end of Mughal rule in 1858.

5 Constructing the Mughal aesthetic

The establishment of the Mughal Empire in the 16th century marked a new phase in artistic production on the subcontinent. Drawing on Timurid traditions, artists combined Central Asian and Iranian elements with regional styles. This synthesis was reinforced by ties to the Safavid court, with Iranian artists directing some of the royal Mughal workshops. These influences shaped a distinctive courtly style that also incorporated European elements.

Materials of power

The Mughal style paired Indian naturalism – notably animal and botanical forms – with precious materials like jade, ivory, and rock crystal. These highly prized materials circulated widely across Asia and beyond, their translucency and polish enhancing the appeal of courtly objects.

6 Encounters across the Indian Ocean

In the 16th century, European expansion reshaped patterns of trade across the Indian Ocean, as European powers – first the Portuguese and later the Dutch and British – sought to control maritime trade. The circulation of raw materials, books, and objects encouraged new forms that combined European, Persian, and Mughal influences, altering both design and use.

Evolving botanical motifs

Mughal naturalism was informed by botanical engravings and printed works brought to India

by Jesuit missions at the end of the 16th century. Artists developed floral designs inspired by herbariums, blending front and side views to lend movement to leaves and petals. By the mid-17th century, these forms were transformed into symmetrical, stylised decoration associated with the Mughal court style.

Echoes in metal

This period also saw the emergence of *bidri*, originally a Deccani technique, in which silver is inlaid into a blackened zinc alloy. These high-contrast designs travelled across the Indian Ocean, influencing metalworking traditions in Islamic Southeast Asia, where similar patterns were produced using different methods.

7 Elegance of Safavid Iran (1501–1736)

In 1501, Shah Ismail I founded the Safavid dynasty, unifying a vast domain extending from Armenia to Afghanistan. He established Shiism as the official state religion in opposition to his

powerful Sunni neighbours: the Ottomans to the west, Uzbeks to the northeast, and Mughals to the east. The Amasya Peace Treaty of 1555 marked a definitive truce with the Ottomans.

Half the world: Isfahan

Shah Abbas I took power in 1587. His reign brought stability, fostering trade and exchange with European powers. The transfer of the capital to Isfahan contributed to the development of a centralised administration under the Shah's direct control. Monuments adorned with brightly coloured ceramic tiles became a defining feature of the city, which was famously known as *nesf-e Jahan* ("half the world").

The end of an era

While Shah Abbas I's successors maintained a degree of prosperity, royal power gradually weakened over the next century. Safavid rule ended in 1736, following the revolt of the Ghalzai Afghans of Kandahar, paving the way for the Afsharid dynasty.

8 Building an empire

Artistic production during the Safavid period was marked by increased trade and the establishment of large-scale workshops. Ceramic production expanded, with a wide range of designs and techniques for both domestic and foreign markets. Figurative scenes and poetic inscriptions were especially prominent, drawing on the rich tradition of Persian literature.

Trading verses

The tiled panel shown here depicts two young men absorbed in a poetry contest, flanked by an attentive observer and a girl bearing a covered dish. While one recites verses, his companion records them in a *safina*, an oblong calligraphy album. Vibrant glazes, outlined by dark lines on an opaque white ground, reflect a technique developed as an efficient alternative to labour-intensive ceramic mosaics. Such panels likely formed part of a pavilion in the royal complex in Isfahan. They were placed

along the lower walls, beneath frescoes, as part of decorative cycles depicting princely entertainment at different times of day.

Tile panel with poetry contest

Iran, mid-17th century

Glazed ceramic

Département des Arts de l'Islam

Musée du Louvre, Paris. Purchase, 1893, OA 3340

9 Devotional practices

Under the Safavid dynasty, Shia Islam was established as the official state religion. The division between Sunni and Shia Islam stems from differing views on the political and spiritual leadership of Muslims after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632. Sunni Muslims believe leaders should be elected based on merit, while Shia Muslims maintain that leadership is a divine right belonging only to the Prophet's direct descendants.

Ritualising practice

Shiite rituals, such as those linked to the birth and death of imams, were officially celebrated throughout the country. This is reflected in numerous surviving objects, such as fragments of banners carried in processions. Openwork steel plaques bearing Shia inscriptions and the names of the holy imams decorated shrine doors and processional standards (*'alams*) carried through the streets.

10 Literary culture

Objects bearing inscriptions are part of a long-standing tradition in the Islamic world. During the Safavid era, metals and ceramics made for a cultured elite were inscribed with mystical poems and wordplay for entertainment.

Courtly art

Surviving paintings and the accounts of European travellers to Iran during the Safavid dynasty attest to the widespread use of metal

objects. Dishes and vessels in precious metals were commonplace at court and were used alongside Chinese and Persian ceramics. Metal was also the material of choice for candlesticks, containers, and weapons. These functional objects also served as a source of admiration, pleasure, and entertainment.

Shared traditions

The Persian language and literature reached Islamic Southeast Asia from the 15th century onwards, with Persian epics and Sufi poetry adapted into Malay chronicles (*hikayat*). These works integrated the ethics of refined conduct (*adab*) into Southeast Asian courtly life and art, reflecting a shared appreciation of literary traditions.

11 China and Iran

Global trade flourished throughout the 17th century. Traditional overland routes remained active while maritime routes were increasingly

shaped by European expansion. During the transition from Ming to Qing rule, China intensified trade through the Silk Road and maritime networks, exporting vast quantities of porcelain. Meanwhile, Shah Abbas I welcomed the British and Dutch East India Companies to Iran, dismantling the earlier Portuguese monopoly on trade. This influx of goods transformed Iranian markets, encouraging new forms of production and exchange.

The allure of blue-and-white

Chinese blue-and-white porcelain became a coveted status symbol for the Safavid elite, prized for its rarity and technical sophistication. Safavid workshops faced intense pressure to compete with these imports, as local potters sought to replicate the appearance of Chinese wares. While initially copying Chinese models, they eventually integrated Chinese motifs into Persian designs and patterns, synthesising these elements into a vibrant, hybrid style.