

Press Release

Brooklyn Museum



Small Vase (detail), Raqqa, Syria. Ayyubid period, 13th century. Ceramic, 4¼ x 4¼ x 4¼ in. (12 x 12 x 10.8 cm). Brooklyn Museum; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Frederic B. Pratt, 36.944. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

The Brooklyn Museum Announces *Syria, Then and Now: Stories from Refugees a Century Apart*

On view October 13, 2018–January 13, 2019

The Brooklyn Museum examines connections between the historical and modern-day plights of refugees in *Syria, Then and Now: Stories from Refugees a Century Apart*, which features highlights from the museum's collection of thirteenth century Syrian ceramics alongside work by the contemporary Arab artists Ginane Makki Bacho, Issam Kourbaj, and Mohamed Hafez. The juxtaposition between these works highlights the ongoing struggle to find home during tumultuous times and the commonalities between refugees throughout history. *Syria, Then and Now: Stories from Refugees a Century Apart*, on view October 13, 2018, through January 13, 2019, is curated by Ayşin Yoltar-Yıldırım, Hagop Kevorkian Associate Curator of Islamic Art, Brooklyn Museum, as part of the Arab Art & Education Initiative.

Seventeen medieval Islamic ceramics are on display in the exhibition. These artifacts were originally discovered around the turn of the twentieth century in Raqqa, Syria, by Circassian refugees, an ethnic Muslim group that fled Russia looking to escape forced military service, religious conversion, and the imposition of the Russian language. The refugees who settled in Raqqa near the ruins of the medieval city were permitted to search through the rubble for bricks to build their new homes, leading to the discovery of these intricately decorated glazed ceramics, which became sought-after collector's items in Europe and the United States.

While Syria once gave shelter to refugees, it is now a country of turmoil that many seek to escape. Today, Raqqa has become synonymous with ISIS, the terrorist group that until recently has claimed the Syrian city as the capital of its new Islamic state. The ongoing civil war in Syria and the rise of ISIS have forced many to flee the country, a struggle that is the focus of the three contemporary artists whose work is also on view.

Ginane Makki Bacho is a Lebanese artist based in Beirut whose work explores the violence of war and ISIS, as well as the trauma experienced by refugees trying to leave by boat. Her *Refugees* sculpture series (2016–2018) visualizes the harrowing experience refugees face once they make the decision to leave their homeland. The artist uses scrap metal to make her sculptures, a material that emphasizes the degradation of civilization and conveys the physical and emotional loss experienced by refugees.

Issam Kourbaj is a Syrian artist based in Cambridge, United Kingdom. His work focuses on the suffering and high mortality rate faced by Syrian refugees as they try to escape their war-torn country. Included in *Syria, Then and Now* is Kourbaj's work *Dark Water, Burning World* (2017). Made from discarded bicycle mudguards and extinguished matches, *Dark Water, Burning World* is inspired by ancient Syrian vessels and deals with the way present-day Syrians attempt to escape their homeland.

Mohamad Hafez is a Syrian artist based in New Haven, Connecticut. His work aims to humanize the word “refugee” and contextualize the Syrian war and its effects. Hafez has two works in *Syria, Then and Now*: *Damascene Athan* (2017) and *Baggage Series 4* (2016). The former, a mixed-media installation portrays elements of life in Damascus, Syria, before the start of the country's civil war. The latter, another mixed-media installation that grows out of a vintage suitcase, is a physical manifestation of the traumas refugees carry with them upon leaving their homes. By combining contemporary art with antique suitcases, Hafez draws connections between today's Syrian refugees and America's history as a nation of immigrants.

Each artist tells a different story, but in the end each calls upon our common humanity for compassionate attention to refugees' precarious situation worldwide.