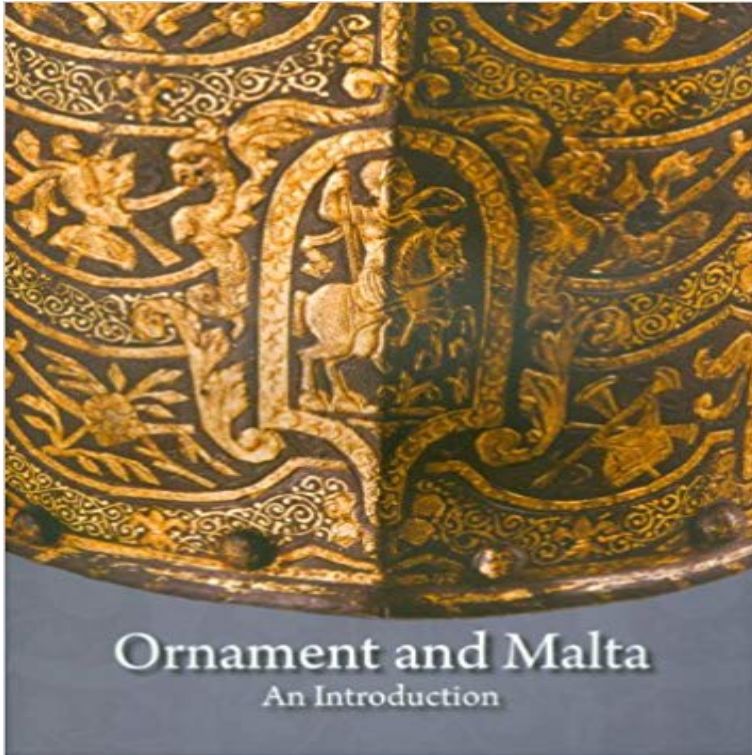


Ornament and Malta: An Introduction



This catalogue covers the latest of a series of international exhibitions staged by Heritage Malta. The exhibition in Malta includes over one hundred pieces from the Khalili Collection. Most were made by, or at the workshop of, Placido Zuloaga in the small town of Eibar in northern Spain. Different metals were fused together, hammered and chiselled to create precious treasures of fine metal craftsmanship including chests, vases, jewellery and objects from everyday life. Some of the pieces were commissioned by the Spanish Royal Family and contemporary collectors. The collection has been painstakingly brought together by Prof. Nasser David Khalili and is considered to be the best Spanish nineteenth-century damascene collection both in quality and extent. The art of damascening in precious metals on iron is of great antiquity, and was the decoration of choice on arms and armour from prehistory through to modern times. Both Eastern and Western tradition have placed its origin in what are now Islamic lands—a tradition as current in the Mongolia of Kublai Khan as it was in the Castile of El Cid. Damascened arms proclaimed the status of their bearer and this function was no less important than the efficacy of the weapons in combat. In assembling this collection of Islamic art, a variety of beautifully damascened objects were acquired, including many Islamic arms, some from as late as the nineteenth century, on which the gold and silver ornament was still as beautifully and delicately applied as it had been hundreds of years earlier. The catalogue of that collection, *The Arts of War*, has already presented an impressive array of Islamic damascening applied to arms, especially of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Other areas of the Khalili Collection are equally rich in Islamic objects of a more peaceful nature which are wonderful examples of the damasceners skill. In the

West, Spain raised the art to the pinnacle of perfection, and it was therefore only natural that Spanish damascening should have so captured my interest. This was the Western kingdom in which the art and culture of Islam particularly flourished, and it is Spain that has always led the West in the beauty and quality of its damascene production. The preservation of damascening in Spain was almost entirely due to the genius of a single family, the Zuloagas. The town of Eibar, remote in the mountains of the Basque country, became through their efforts the centre of European damascening in the nineteenth century. Interestingly, the impact of the Zuloagas was for a brief period even greater in England than in Spain itself. The Khalili Collection contains many fine examples of Spanish damascene, but none quite so fine as those made by Don Placido and the disciples he trained in his workshop in Eibar during the latter half of the nineteenth century. The Knights of the Order of St John of Jerusalem became established in Malta in 1530 when Charles V of Spain as King of Sicily gave them Malta and the North African port of Tripoli in perpetual fiefdom in exchange for an annual fee of a single Maltese falcon. It is entirely fitting therefore that this collection of Spanish Damascene Metalwork should now be shown in Malta, following in the footsteps of previous exhibitions at The Victoria and Albert Museum, the Alhambra Palace in Granada, and Real Fundacion in Toledo.

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