



Hispano-Muslim (Moorish)

**Gold Lion Statuette**, 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century

Gold

H. 4  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 4 x 2 inches

The Katherine Kettridge McMillan Memorial Fund, 72.12

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## Theme

Throughout the centuries, many cultures have seen lions as symbols of courage, strength, and majesty. The specific function of this charming gold statuette, measuring less than five inches high, remains a mystery; however, its elaborate construction and elegant design suggest a purpose: a luxury item to delight the beholder. Undoubtedly, this figure served as a symbol of prestige and style for an aristocratic home in Muslim Spain around the 11th and 12th centuries.

## Background

This lion comes from Spain, which was conquered from the Christian Visigoths (originally Germanic people) by the Muslim Umayyad [oo-my-ahd] empire in 711. The Umayyads ruled from Syria and established the southern region of the Iberian Peninsula as their empire's westernmost province, which they called *al-Andalus*. Parts of the region remained under the control of a Muslim empire or kingdom for the next 700 years, until Catholic armies brought Muslim rule to an end in 1492.

The Umayyad period in Spain was characterized by thriving trade, rich cultural exchange, and superlative artistic production. The Umayyads ruled from the city of Córdoba, which eventually grew to more than 500,000 inhabitants, comprising Muslims, Christians and Jews. By the end of the 10th century, Córdoba had become an international center of culture, science, philosophy, and learning. Arabic was the official language, and with a wealth of libraries and educational institutions, Islamic Iberia boasted a literacy rate that was higher and more widespread than in any other region in Western Europe. Many European Christian scholars studied in Muslim Spain and North Africa

At the beginning of the 11th century, the Umayyad dynasty was dissolved into a number of small, independent states, called the *taifa* [tah'-e-fah] kingdoms. The rulers, or *emirs*, of these aristocratic principalities fought among themselves for military supremacy and cultural prestige. They recruited the most famous poets to write sonnets and commissioned artisans to produce luxury goods for their personal pleasure. The lion statuette, produced at this time, is a testament to the sophisticated taste of the *taifa* rulers.

## Lion Statuette

This lion statuette is Islamic in style and principle. Islamic art refers to works of art made by and for Muslims as expressions of the Islamic faith or its values, which also encompasses secular objects, made by cultures that flourished within the cultural environment of Islam. It is a common belief that Islam forbids the representation of living beings, yet portrayals of human and animal forms in the secular sphere can be found in all eras of Islamic art. The Qur'an, the Islamic holy book, does not explicitly prohibit figural representation, though it condemns idolatry as a form of worship and so figural images are not found in mosques and other religious settings. Nevertheless, many Muslims—like people everywhere—enjoy pictures of people and animals in their everyday lives. Figural images in Islamic art, such as this small lion, are not intended to stimulate devotion, but serve instead as decorative reminders of the spiritual realm. Beautiful works of art are considered a reflection of the glory of heaven. Muslims—like any people who are associated by a common religion or political affiliation—hold a variety of beliefs, including their views on figural representation and approaches to art.

Although it is not known what exact purpose this small figure served, the receptacle at the top of the handle and the hollow body provide some clues as to how it might have been used. It is widely regarded that this lion is an aquamanile—a liquid-containing vessel, usually in the shape of an animal. The lion could have been a receptacle for water, oil or perfumes. The liquid would enter the cavity through the top of the handle and, when tipped, it is believed that the liquid would flow from the lion's tongue. It is also thought that the receptacle may have held a small candle or piece of aromatic incense, or served as a lamp.

Whatever its intended function, the statuette was certainly regarded as an object to be admired and treasured. Made of gold, it is extremely rare. Gold is a soft metal that is easily melted down and repurposed. For a delicate object such as this to have survived such a long and fractious period in history is remarkable. Only a few examples of small, gold filigree figures from this same period exist. The work closest in size, style, and workmanship is a winged ram found in northwestern Spain, now in the Provincial Museum of Lugo. Most gold work from Andalus was melted down by the Catholic conquerors of Muslim Spain (similar to the gold of the Aztecs and Incas) and the works that survived were generally ones that were buried inside walls of houses at the time of the expulsions of Muslims, who thought that the political situation might change and they could retrieve the works at some later time upon their return. Muslims and Jews were not permitted to take any valuables with them when they were exiled.

The symbolism of the lion is as enigmatic as the object itself. Early Muslim cultures inherited a large number of symbolic motifs drawn from a combination of Greco-Roman, Byzantine, Visigothic and Sassanian (ancient Persian) influences. When placed into Muslim context, many symbols lost their initial significance and became purely decorative. A symbolic association of the lion to royalty seems to have transformed from one of high significance to primarily ornamental. Representations of lions are found on luxury objects and commonplace everyday ware.

This statuette may have been modeled after the lion statues that support the basin of the fountain at the Palace of the Lions at the Alhambra, a fortress in Granada, Spain, regarded as one of the most famous examples of Islamic art and architecture. The fountain was built in the 14th century, but the twelve stone lions that make up the base

of the fountain come from an earlier source, likely taken from an Umayyad palace in Córdoba from around the 10th century.

## Style

The lion statuette is completely covered in intricate ornament from head to toe. The surface is infused with floral and tendril filigree (small, thin threads of metal) and fine granulation (tiny metal beads), techniques that were widely used in Visigothic, Greco-Roman, Byzantine and Sassanian jewelry before adoption into the jewelry arts of the Muslim world. The closer you look at the lion, the more complexity of detail you discover. Islamic art draws on the creativity of many cultures and artistic traditions, but despite the diversity of its origins, Islamic art is often distinguished by an emphasis on ornamentation. Indeed, ornamentation is one of the most characteristic features of Islamic art and has been used from the 7<sup>th</sup> century to the present. The Arabic word for ornament is *zakhrafa*, which means “to gild.” It refers to the richness that permeates so many forms of Islamic art.

Ornamental designs based on floral and geometric patterns are among the most popular forms of decoration found on Islamic works of art. Flowers, leaves, and vines grow within geometric patterned surfaces and are contained by finely beaded registers that follow the form and structure of the lion’s body. Four little birds perch within the branches at the four corners of the lion’s back. Such a well-ordered garden may refer to the Garden of Paradise, promised in the afterlife to devout Muslims in the Qur’an. The delicacy of the applied décor and geometrically ordered patterning suggests a fine embroidered coat that softens the beast. The lion remains regal and refined, but the profusion of decoration makes it transcend the animal kingdom into a spiritual realm beyond this world.

## Technique

Gold has long been valued for its beauty and coveted for its prestige. Gold is the most malleable of metals, capable of being pounded, stretched, or shaped without cracking or breaking. In its pure form, gold is too soft to be used alone and must be alloyed with another metal, such as copper or silver.

This small lion was likely made with the lost-wax process. First, a model of the lion is made of wax and coated in clay. When the clay is fired, the wax melts and is drained away, leaving an exact impression of the wax model in the cavity of the fired clay. The cavity is then filled with molten gold. When the gold is cool, the clay is carefully broken away, revealing the gold object. In this case, the statuette’s torso, head, mane, legs, feet, and handle may have been cast as separate pieces and soldered together. Decorative elements of granulation and filigree skillfully applied over the seams hide any trace of joinery and unify the form.

Granulation is the process by which minute gold spheres are fused to a gold surface. Fusing involves raising the temperature of the surface metal and the granules to the point at which they will adhere. The technique is extremely precise: if the correct temperature is not reached, the granules will not hold; if the temperature is too high, the

granules will melt. The tiny spheres are first glued to the surface; the surface is then slowly heated to the precise temperature to fuse the spheres onto the base. The wires that comprise the filigree are attached with the same fusion process.

The minuscule granules are made by snipping small sections of wire onto a charcoal plate brought to just the right temperature so that the pieces liquefy and “bead up.” Sphere size varies according to the thickness of the wire and the uniformity of the spheres is dependent on the precise cutting of the wire. To make the hair-fine wire, a rod of gold is threaded and pulled through a succession of funnels, each smaller than the next. It is then twisted or plaited to create the braid-like quality found on the statuette’s filigree. The combination of lustrous gold, delicate décor, and intricate patterning on such an impossibly small scale make this a tour de force of metalworking skill as accomplished by a jeweler. Mysteries around this object remain, but the rich cultural and artistic traditions of Muslim Spain around the 11th and 12th centuries are clearly revealed.

## Artist

The artist responsible for this remarkable object cannot be identified. Many artists and artisans lived and worked on commission in large districts surrounding palatial courts. As members of guilds, they produced a variety of goods for rulers as well as for merchants, courtiers, and officials of the court. In some cases, workshops were formed and supported within the palace walls. After the establishment of the taifa kingdoms, however, only a few emirs had the resources to commission such works or support workshops that made objects of this quality.

The gold lion statuette at the MIA is a rare example of goldsmithing in Muslim Spain. There are a few examples of similar objects in Spain, Switzerland, and Canada. Gold jewelry using these same techniques is on view in many museums featuring Islamic art, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

## Suggested Questions

1. Look closely at this lion. What do you notice about its decorations? Do you notice any patterns? What shapes do you see in the patterns? Do you think this lion was created to be symmetrical (the same on both sides)?
2. Does this lion look like a real lion? How is this statue similar and/or different to a real lion? What physical characteristics of a lion are depicted to make it look naturalistic? What aspects of this lion are stylized? What characteristics do you associate with a lion?
3. Considering the intricate details of the filigree and granulation to the use of gold, a very precious metal, who do you think owned this lion? [Royalty or aristocrats of Muslim Spain] What attributes of a lion might the aristocrat want to associate with? What animal would you select to represent you?
4. The actual lion statuette is less than 5 inches tall. The classroom reproduction is almost four times the actual size! Why would you create something to scale? What other types of art use printing or drawing to scale? [Architecture] How does

- the impact of this object change when you know its actual size? Have your impressions of this object changed knowing it is quite small?
5. Compare this lion statuette to the Benin Leopard. Notice the actual size difference. How are they similar? How are they different? How is it that their uses could have been the same?
  6. There is a lot of speculation on what this lion was used for (aquamanile, candle holder, lamp, incense burner); its actual purpose is unknown. What do *you* think this lion was used for and why? What would *you* do with this lion? Where would you put it?
  7. Due to the fragility of this object, it would have been handled with exceptional care and may have even been purely decorative. Do you have any belongings that are used only for decoration? Dolls? Model cars? Autographed baseballs? How do you display these items? What makes them so important to you?
  8. This lion is made of gold, a very precious metal. Why do you think the artist used gold instead of silver, clay, wax, or bronze? What do you think its being made of gold signifies?
  9. Think of TV shows, movies, plays, or books that have lions in them. How have those lions been portrayed/depicted? (*The Lion King, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, The Wizard of Oz, etc...*)