There is abundant evidence of cultural contact in the art of the Near East, Egypt, and the Greek and Roman world. The exact routes by which certain types, techniques, and subjects traveled between these areas are still debated, but the interrelations are extensive, as any study of the material remains of the ancient world proves.

In the fourth millennium B.C. the evidence is sparse, but in the third, second, and first millennia it becomes overwhelming. Peaceful trade movements of itinerant craftsmen and the capture in war of objects and the artisans who made them all contributed to the breaking of the boundaries between these countries — at least in the realm of art. By the middle of the first millennium A.D. a further stage is reached: to a large degree, the Near East comes to share a common language of art with the West.

Cultural interconnections appear to us to result in abrupt changes in taste or style. In fact, the process was probably gradual and, while many foreign elements may have been absorbed in a country’s art, its institutions, beliefs, or customs often remained relatively unaltered.

The primary intention of the exhibition Origin and Influence, which will be on view through April 23, has been to trace the sources of various motifs and techniques. It has been of nearly equal interest, however, to compare the original with the imitation in order to discover something of the culture of the borrower. Additions or omissions are often a matter of deliberate choice, not accident. Some of the themes in the exhibition are illustrated and discussed on the following pages.

The blue lotus, a plant abundant in Egypt, was used decoratively for millennia in Near Eastern art, almost more than any other floral design. On the blue faience cup from Egypt at the right, the base of the bowl is covered with the pointed petals of this flower, while the foot bears an abbreviated form having only five petals, alternating with a bud.
Much less common—and consequently more intriguing—is the occurrence of another species, the white lotus, in the art of Egypt, the Near East, Greece, and Italy. The white lotus differs in form from the blue: the petals are broader and vertically ribbed. The picture below shows three examples of this flower: at the left is an alabaster cup from Egypt that indicates the way in which it is characteristically employed, to decorate or form the body of the vessel. At the right is a fourth-century B.C. silver vase found in Egypt, possibly of Syrian origin, that shows a later development with the tips of the petals turned over. The similarly shaped bronze vessel of the first century B.C. in the center of the illustration continues the tradition. It was found in Iran but must have been made in a Roman workshop, since there is nothing in the form, technique, or style to suggest Near Eastern workmanship. The petals on this late vessel no longer overlap naturally, but are rigidly separated and placed side by side. Although this piece is an import from the West, a glass vessel with the same motif of the fourth century B.C. found at Nippur in Mesopotamia proves that the design itself was familiar to Near Eastern artisans and occasionally used by them.
Two fantastic creatures, the griffin and the lion-griffin, are closely linked iconographically in Near Eastern art. Griffins have the body of a lion and the head of a bird; they occur as early as 3000 B.C. in Iran, and from that source passed to Egypt, although they were never represented with any frequency in Egyptian art. The one on the Twelfth Dynasty wand above is quite different from Near Eastern types. It has a falcon's head (the stylization of the feathering around the eye is characteristically Egyptian), a long, thin neck, and wings placed well back on the body.

Toward the end of the third millennium lion-griffins appear on Mesopotamian seals, at first as the attribute of the weather god and then as the subject of innumerable contests with other animals and with human or divine beings. Lion-griffins have a lion's body, a leonine head with tall upright ears, wings, a feathered tail, and hind legs like those of a bird of prey. In the second millennium on Middle Assyrian seals, a pronounced knob projects from the forehead. The lion-griffin in the Schimmel collection, shown at the right, has the typical head with upright ears, and a ruff around the neck as well.

By the second and early first millennium B.C., griffins had taken on many of the features of lion-griffins—upright ears, neck ruff, and forehead knob. Different types were characteristic of different areas. The version current in the eastern Mediterranean had long S-shaped locks and a crest with one or more upright curls. An ivory from Nimrud (left) provides a good illustration of this type: although the ivory was found in Assyria, the griffin is based on Western forms, differing from the Assyrian type that invariably has a crest of stiff upright feathers running from the top of the head down the neck.

The Greeks took over the idea of the griffin in the late eighth and seventh century B.C. In Greek art the monster's characteristic features were a forehead knob, upright horses' ears, and gaping beak. These are clearly visible on the two griffin heads illustrated below: one on the center of a gold ornament, probably made on the island of Rhodes in the seventh century B.C., and the other the bronze finial of an Etruscan chariot pole.
Above: Iranian, early 1 millennium B.C. Bronze, length 8 inches. Lent by Norbert Schimmel, L 1970.73.1
Opposite page, counterclockwise from top:
Fragments of a magic knife (the center section is in the Louvre). Egyptian, about 1800 B.C.
Hippopotamus ivory, length of right section 4 13/16 inches. Carnarvon Collection, Gift of Edward S. Harkness, 26.7.1288
Impression of a cylinder seal with griffins of the Assyrian type. Iran (Hasanlu), IX century B.C.
Joint expedition with the University of Pennsylvania Museum, Gift of Mrs. Constantine Sidamon-Eristoff, 61.100.80
Nimrud, IX-VIII century B.C. Ivory, height 3 1/16 inches. Rogers Fund, 64.37.4
Etruscan, early VI century B.C. Bronze, height 7 1/8 inches. Samuel D. Lee Fund, 42.11.2
Craftsmen living in Assyria and Cyprus from the ninth to seventh centuries B.C. belonged to an international community in which artistic forms were borrowed, traded, and transformed by the various cultures. This silver-gilt bowl, probably datable to the seventh century B.C., was found on Cyprus and is perhaps the work of a Phoenician artist. It illustrates a number of subjects that had been current in the art of the Mediterranean world as well as that of Syria and Palestine almost a millennium earlier. Three such motifs are the cow suckling a calf, a figure spearing a griffin, and the volute tree on which two griffins place their forelegs. The similarity between these designs and those carved on ivories from Nimrud in northern Assyria (shown at the left) is therefore not surprising, although the ivories are almost a century earlier in date. The majority of the ivory carvings found in the royal residences and storerooms at Nimrud illustrate Mediterranean motifs and styles. They indicate the extent to which the taste of the Assyrian royalty and nobility early in the first millennium B.C. was influenced by the art of the newly conquered lands to the west. Some of the ivories must have come to Nimrud as tribute or booty, mounted in furniture or decorating small objects of luxury. Eventually foreign artisans came or were brought to Nimrud and, working there, may have trained Assyrian craftsmen to reproduce this style.

The bowl is set apart from the ivories by the slender proportions of its figures and by the great delicacy of its repoussé and chased designs. The ivories were originally covered with gold foil, however, and it is possible that additional details were finely chased in the gold. Such a theory remains pure speculation, since the foil was systematically torn from the ivories in Nimrud's final destruction, and in only a few instances are small pieces preserved.
Many of the Nimrud ivories illustrate themes of Egyptian origin. But comparison of Egyptian models with the ivory imitations reveals significant differences in iconography and presents clear proof that the Nimrud ivories, although Egyptian in appearance, were not actually made in that country.

The Egyptian bronze above is a form of the god Horus, here shown as the local divinity of a town in the Nile delta. Wearing an elaborate hmhm crown, he is trampling on a white oryx, a hostile animal believed to attack children.

The figures of Horus on the Nimrud ivories illustrated above differ from this representation, although it is clear that they are modeled on the Egyptian deity. In both the ivories, the god is clothed not only in a short kilt, as in the Egyptian piece, but in a long mantle as well. In the first example, Horus wears a strange version of the crown of Upper and Lower Egypt and has an empty cartouche placed in the field before him, an element that should accompany a royal figure. The wavy lines of the hair on the other Nimrud ivory, the false hieroglyphs, the floral “scepter,” and the type of garment distinguish this figure from Egyptian models too.

More alike in form are two examples of the aegis of Sekhmet, illustrated at the upper right: one, a bronze from Egypt, the other, an ivory from Nimrud. The lion with a ruff, much abbreviated on the ivory, and the lappets of a wig are present in both. The artist who made the ivory, however, omitted the uraeus and sun disk on the head but added an upright “crest” between the ears. Whether in this detail he confused the image with that of Bes, who is regularly shown with feathers in this position, or intended to show a headdress worn by Egyptian goddesses and queens, is uncertain.

Two depictions of Sekhmet herself, above, dramatize the difference between an Egyptian original and a Near Eastern interpretation. In the Egyptian bronze Sekhmet is shown as a woman, while on the Nimrud ivory the divinity is clearly male, wearing a man’s short kilt. Further, the monkey seated on the lotus is not associated with Sekhmet in Egyptian art and the scepter is unlike the floral scepters assigned to goddesses in Egypt.
Of all the felines represented in Near Eastern art, the lion is the commonest, the companion or attribute of gods, the antagonist of kings. Of less significance to the Near Easterner were the leopard and tiger. The leopard occurs as early as the third millennium B.C. in the art of Mesopotamia, but a new stimulus for the representation of this animal (often referred to as a panther) came from the introduction, late in the first millennium B.C., of objects from the West related to the cult of Dionysus. As a fierce and agile beast the leopard was a suitable companion for the god of wine, and was frequently depicted in mosaics, marble sculpture, and smaller works of art, such as the bronze above. The female,
thought to be the fiercer sex, was preferred in Roman art and was likewise favored in the East; this one, playfully rolling on her back, was probably part of a group showing Dionysus or one of his retinue, a satyr or a maenad. Its spots are indicated by niello and silver inlays. The tiny silver leopard at the right, springing out of leaves, served as the handle of a drinking vessel—perhaps a wine goblet, for which such a handle would have been appropriate.

Much of the symbolism of the cult, and at first possibly its religious significance, was adopted in the East. By the Sasanian period (A.D. 226-651), however, the meaning of scenes with grapevines and animals, drinking figures, dancing females, and winemaking is uncertain. Some reinterpretation, some different sense may lie behind the Sasanian representations. For instance, on the late Sasanian bowl in the Schimmel collection shown at the bottom of the opposite page, the traditional leopard has been replaced by a tigress. This more exotic animal, native to Mazanderan in Iran, usually occurs in Sasanian art as the object of a hunt.

Most Sasanian works with niello belong to the last century and a half of that period, and it may well be that its use is an indication of Byzantine influence. Here, the stripes of the tigress are simply inlaid with niello, the common way in which the material was employed in the West; the Sasanians, however, also used niello in a more unusual fashion, to form raised parts of the design, in this instance the bunches of grapes.

In Islamic art, the leopard continued to appear on vessels perhaps used as containers for wine. The one on the right probably dates from the early Islamic period, the late seventh or early eighth century (although similar ones occur at least as late as the twelfth century): the vase’s shape, its circular mouth, and the ducks’ heads decorating the rim are without parallel in Sasanian art and reflect a renewed influence of Roman forms on objects of the early Islamic period. This may perhaps be explained by the establishment of the Omayyad capital in the west at Damascus, or, in the case of this particular vessel, by the fact that it comes from the Caucasus, an area where quantities of Roman vessels have been found and where late antique forms and designs persisted for centuries.

Roman, I-II century
A.D. Silver, height 2 1/8 inches.
Rogers Fund, 10.210.41

Iranian (Sasanian), VII-VIII century A.D. Bronze, height 18 1/4 inches. Fletcher Fund, 47.100.90. Compare the ducks’ heads on the rim of this ewer (lower detail) with those on a Syrian jug of the Roman period (upper detail), 1 century A.D.
The idea of protecting a design in gold by means of a transparent substance was conceived of as early as the sixth century B.C.: in the Etruscan earring of that date (shown at the upper left), gold filigree is covered by a rock-crystal disk. But the practice of placing gold leaf between two glass casings in a drinking vessel did not develop until about 200 B.C. It lasted into Byzantine times, some six hundred years later. In Hellenistic gold glass (the fragment at the upper right), the floral designs were fashioned from small geometric bits of gold leaf—lozenges, triangles, and the like—whereas in Roman and Byzantine gold glass (the two fragments below, showing the figures of Ocean and St. Lawrence), the designs were formed by contouring large areas of gold leaf and then scratching details through.