

“Embodying the Object: Writing with the Collection” (ENGL 3850), Spring 2016
Cornell University

These poems were written for the course “Embodying the Object,” an intermediate-level writing course, in response to works of art on view during the Spring 2016 semester at the Johnson Museum.

Significant readings of texts that foregrounded visual arts, the art of description (known as ekphrasis), and ars poetica, among other topics, were incorporated. Coursework included in-depth viewing of and discussion of art from a range of cultures and time periods, interventions of poetry now on view in the first- and second-floor galleries, discussions of readings, explorations of form and technique, writing assignments with peer review, and public readings of poems in the Museum. Artist Lesley Dill and poet Rachel Griffiths were guest presenters.

“Embodying the Object” was part of “Connecting Research with Practice,” the Johnson Museum’s Andrew W. Mellon Foundation grant-funded initiative.

Instructors

Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon
Associate Professor, Department of English

Cathy Rosa Klimaszewski
Associate Director/Harriet Ames Charitable Trust Curator of Education
Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art

Students

Fatima Abdul-Khadir
Agriculture and Life Sciences/
Environmental Engineering

Daniel Cooper
Arts and Sciences/English

Spencer Holm
Arts and Sciences/English

Nathaniel Hunter
Arts and Sciences/English

Jacqueline Inglis
Arts and Sciences/Biological Sciences

Ayman Itani
Human Ecology/Design and
Environmental Analysis

Eva Jahan
Agriculture and Life
Sciences/Interdisciplinary Study in ALS

Irene Lin
Arts and Sciences/Biological Sciences

Kite Miya
Arts and Sciences/English

Paul Orshansky
Industrial and Labor Relations

Alexander Pomerenk
Engineering/Computer Science

Larry Runnels
Arts and Sciences/English

Morgan Salama
Arts and Sciences/Government

Henry Schuth
Arts and Sciences/English

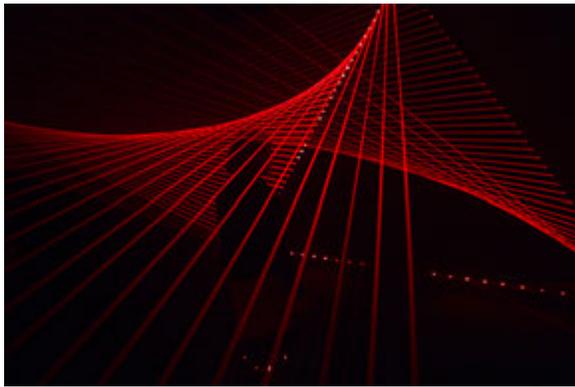
“Embodying the Object: Writing with the Collection” (ENGL 3850), Spring 2016
Cornell University

Transfixed in the Crosshairs

(In response to Matthew Schreiber’s *Crossbow*)

If I could smooth over lines of reality to reach you
again, don’t think for a second that I would not.
Your time cycles with the stars,
a corpse already thousands of years gone; I still sense you.
Your shape is an absence of presence—haunting—
a shadow dancing the slopes of life.
Were you a ghost?
I find myself transfixed with your mechanics,
watching your red veins pumping blue blood, lying to the world,
bleeding a sensual crimson across the floor—
too peaceful to be an end; I gave you beginning.

—Fatima Abdul-Khabir



Matthew Schreiber
American, born 1967
Crossbow, 2016
Laser diode modules
Installation at the
Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art,
Cornell University
(February 5–August 28, 2016)

“Embodying the Object: Writing with the Collection” (ENGL 3850), Spring 2016
Cornell University

Warrior

(In response to the Hoplite helmet)

Dented
Squashed
Green, and oxidized
Ravaged by the hands of time

But once you would have been polished
Worked with cloth until you gleamed
Were you a warrior’s pride?
Passed from father to son, and son again

Or were you a terror
With each glimpse
Sweaty palms
Trembling hands

The sound of pounding horse hooves
The puncture of arrow in flesh
The dust, the blood, the cries
Mayhem

Or were you just a tool?
A uniform
As ordinary as a doctor’s coat
Or a baker’s hat

—Daniel Cooper



Greece, Corinth, ca. 550 BC
Hoplite (heavy infantry) helmet
Bronze
Collection of Higgins Armory Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts

"Embodying the Object: Writing with the Collection" (ENGL 3850), Spring 2016
Cornell University

The Dragon's Tail

(In response to *Saint George Slaying the Dragon*)

Your tale so mythical
Legendary
Known to those who don't even know your story
A timeless battle of man and demon

But here, your eyes
Not the eyes of a warrior
A lover of violence, of bloodshed
Here they're empty
Despondent
Blankly staring into the distance

And the dragon?
No fiery beast of hell
A whimpering dog
Curled up at his master's feet

The beast's gaze
The pitiful look of a beaten child
Accepting unwarranted punishment

His tail curled around your leg
Not a serpent, stifling the blood flow of life
But sad embrace
Perhaps a plea

Is this the tale, the great impossible feat?
Do we praise the strong
With his foot on the neck of the weak?

—Daniel Cooper



Germany
Saint George Slaying the Dragon, ca. 1450–1500
Polychromed linden wood
Gift of Mrs. Morris G. Bishop
76.008.005

"Embodying the Object: Writing with the Collection" (ENGL 3850), Spring 2016
Cornell University

Eternal

(In response to Helen Pashgian's *Untitled*)

The dormant orb is nothing.
Smell it in the dark.
Nuzzle up, until condensation forms
on the same surface
Sisyphus kissed.

Who knew boulders held pearls?

Vista dreams
eroded by tributaries of sweat.
Afternoon thunderclaps
conducted by his boulder plundering down,
shedding skin the size of sand.

"Eternal frustration!" sentenced Zeus
unbeknownst to the law of conservation of mass:
Matter cannot be created or destroyed.

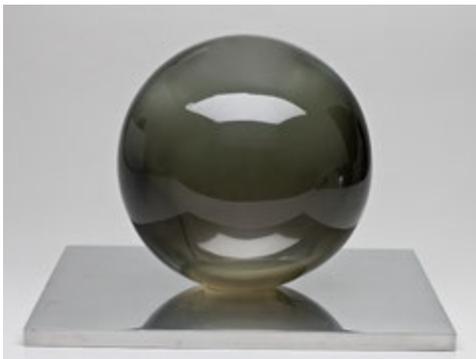
How absurd.

How did Sisyphus escape
fate?
Ask the orb—the oracle.

*He did not. His fate simply changed states
He stands in this very room,
alone
studying fingerprints
on the surface
while Zeus crescendos:
"Do Not Touch!"*

Eternally.

—Spencer Holm



Helen Pashgian
American, born 1934
Untitled, 1969
Cast epoxy with stainless steel base
Acquired with funds provided by the National
Endowment for the Arts, and through the generosity of
individual donors
69.091

“Embodying the Object: Writing with the Collection” (ENGL 3850), Spring 2016
Cornell University

Asphalt

(In response to Rachel Whiteread’s *Untitled (Round Table)*)

At twelve, I would walk barefoot on asphalt
Soles scorching in summer, and my neighbors and I
Would see who could last longest,
Blisters inevitably following as we tread
With false calm

On the hottest days, patches of asphalt
Began to melt, became black gum, and
I’d press a finger, a hand, leaving a
Permanent imprint if I waited for the sunset.
I imagined putting all of myself in,
Perhaps with a table, a few chairs
And becoming cemented there.

I still dream of dipping myself in concrete
But what was once competition, later meditation,
These days, is only penance
I imagine sinking into the concrete, mouth deep,
Eye deep, letting it fill my throat and
Maybe even my lungs, and when it’s cured
Being burnt out, as I now understand
Was the fate of the tables
And of the chairs.

Just leave my ashes in the hollow
Just leave me be

—Nathaniel Hunter



Rachel Whiteread
British, born 1963

Untitled (Round Table), 1997–98

Plaster and polystyrene

Gift of Klondike Resources, Inc., in honor of Sherry Vogel
Mallin, Class of 1955, and Joel Mallin, Class of 1955
2015.052

“Embodying the Object: Writing with the Collection” (ENGL 3850), Spring 2016
Cornell University

Ships Frozen

(In response to William Bradford’s *Waiting for the Thaw* [Arctic Whaling Scene])

Little people in little boats
Failures at conquering the world
Left in humiliation upon winter’s
Pedestal
Wooden skeletons with masts
Weakly fluttering—sailing phantom winds
Carcasses firmly trapped, above as below
Wanton struggle of molested peoples
Draped in cloaks of mottled
Wool. Home of the unmoving
False shores breached with ice
Mountains, frozen in delusion’s illusion
Enduring for a brief moment till evidence
Vanishes with gentle ease of sun
And maudlin silence of seclusion
That sound—that laughing chorus—
Of places, never to be won
Or vanquished. Oceans teem with bodies of great leviathans
Sliding through dense waters, to pass
Such magnificent human foolishness.

—Jackie Inglis



William Bradford
American, 1823–1892
Waiting for the Thaw (Arctic Whaling Scene),
1877
Oil on canvas
Acquired through the University Purchase Fund
68.193

Stone in the Sea

(In response to William Trost Richards’s *Breaking Waves*)



William Trost Richards
American, 1833–1905
Breaking Waves, 1898
Oil on canvas
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Frederick Baekeland
99.077

How would it feel
I wonder, to sit on
This stone in the sea?

To taste the milky white foam
Or a gentle sting from the breeze
To be battered and rammed
Unable to stand, while
You cower on this stone struggling to
breathe.

Gauzy and filmy, frosted bubbles
Spread in webs across arched
Crests of waves leaving you
In a soggy nest of weeds
As you sprawl on this stone and you plead.

The water sucks at your toes
As it inevitably goes back to
Prepare for the next attack and you
Watch as it rises hoping for it to freeze,
Maybe it will be like smooth ice
Or soft crushed snow
As you reach from this stone to see.

The ocean is blue,
Very very blue but here
On this stone to me, it looks like
A gemstone of tourmaline, amazonite
Or even aquamarine.

And even though above you
The clouds will never part
And the waves will stop
And start relentlessly rushing
The spot where you kneel
Slapping and snarling at your
Heels, you can watch even if
You can never touch
In the far off distance
A view from this stone in the sea—
A sunlit hill of brightest evergreen.

—Jackie Inglis

“Embodying the Object: Writing with the Collection” (ENGL 3850), Spring 2016
Cornell University

Where Have the Stars Gone?

(In response to Huang Binhong’s *Landscape*)

How can this man on weighted
Staff, march through snow
Fortress and cragged tree?
To reach peace.

Why fight the down and whirling
Flakes in darkness simply to touch
A frozen place? Where gray winds have
Torn and stripped till nothing but skeletal
Twig posts remain—naked, barren and open.

Prayer will be lost to the whim of
The mountains that cage you in.
Your words are heavy,
They sting and bite down hard
With serrated jaws but they will be washed
Backward down your throat.

You must believe in the good,
The holy, the power of this frigid
Stoned world that you honor with
Each labored breath and step.

Today I envy you. You are one of
Those that can look into the darkness
And see nothing but starlight
Cause for me, it is just
The streaming tears of night’s eye.

—Jackie Inglis



Huang Binhong
Chinese, 1864–1955
Landscape, 1943
Hanging scroll: ink on paper
Gift Dr. and Mrs. Frederick Baekeland
2000.136.004

“Embodying the Object: Writing with the Collection” (ENGL 3850), Spring 2016
Cornell University

Roland Dances in Roses

(In response to Stuart Davis’s *Place des Vosges No. 2*)

Since Roland lost Allen,
love’s been an alien
like the cold-blooded kind
that zaps people into homes,
that paints the streets with ciphers,
no two same aliens.

And Roland can’t decode the alley,
he twirls for houses and gardens
So this is fate, a row
of verandas; the wind
weaves through the lattice
and misses its target.

And when he reaches for
the clay, caked in crime
passional, all the walls tell
is partition, is a smoking neutral,
a chorus of disapproval.
These streets make Roland small,

he flushes with humiliation,
his serenade a separation
he dances like an architect,
a brownfield baron, panting
for a newer sort of construction
live with communicating doors.

So this is Roland’s private fear.
He lets it piss in public
places. He phones home,
and every syllable condenses,
decorates the canvas in clouds,
fades the second he touches it.

—Ayman Itani



Stuart Davis
American, 1894–1964
Place des Vosges No. 2, 1928
Oil on canvas
Dr. and Mrs. Milton Lurie Kramer,
Class of 1936, Collection;
Bequest of Helen Kroll Kramer
77.062.001

“Embodying the Object: Writing with the Collection” (ENGL 3850), Spring 2016
Cornell University

Ghazal for the Wreckage

(In response to Lee Bontecou’s *Flit*)

Who has an elegy for this body that sighs in the seams?
The storm has intersected it, lodging its cries in the seams.

Look at the debris: it circles like pride for its prey;
it bares its stucco teeth, aims to incise in the seams.

The ground tugs at the skin, wants to build it out in parts,
So the bits belong as they should, harmonize in the seams.

And here is called The Doldrums, where you fall through a body,
romance the broken soil, watch it pressurize in the seams.

But it’s no ashen valley, just a blurring of the lashes,
on him they stitched open the eyes in the seams.

What am I to do with this home’s powdered pieces?
When clouds come apart in cumulus clumps, vaporize in the seams.

And the moon is in two. Still, I don’t believe it’s over.
Don’t touch that bell, we can’t find our demise in the seams.

These hills are textured by grass-stained tipping points.
Though the ripper strikes the land, I want to rise in the seams.

Want to hide in their onyx, wrapped in the body of their core,
Want the turbulence of unknowing to stabilize in the seams.

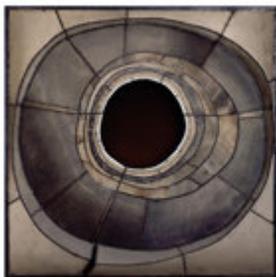
Leave the drywall on the surface in an outline of my body,
A decoy for my hibernation; sing me lullabies in the seams.

And our limbs have barely unraveled from the bed of sordid clay—
They are like the cocoon a butterfly dies in, the seams.

All these broken walls belong to us. And to the fallen,
how the cyclone seethed in their organs, now it flies in the seams.

On this newly spawned flatland, there is nothing but the distance:
sprawling, still life, it wraps our empty skies in the seams.

—Ayman Itani



Lee Bontecou
American, born 1931
Flit, 1959
Welded iron, canvas, wire, and velvet
Anonymous gift
59.140

“Embodying the Object: Writing with the Collection” (ENGL 3850), Spring 2016
Cornell University

Worldbound

(In response to Lisa Sanditz’s *Earthships and their Neighbors*)

Neighbor,
I’ve run the gamut
From my door to yours
And in this box
An olive tree
A rainbow shard
And the branches I removed
To cut an opening
To the yard

Just thought, to color the shack up
I know four walls are not enough
And in this soil, the birds of paradise
Did not grow
I’d plant the tree—if you find kinder loam—
Watch the leaves pirouette
They make for nice music

Have you heard from the earth? I have
Been breathing at night, arranging
Light in the day. It’s not easy
To build a home, but
Then again, I wanted to
Scatter myself, each particle in the wind,
House-train my neurons.

Perhaps
The tree will make a friend
In a silent, stable place
And
If you please
Find me in my cranny
In my hands are four colors of sand
Lifted from our common path...
I know the road is far.

—Ayman Itani



Lisa Sanditz
American, born 1973
Earthships and Their Neighbors, 2005
Acrylic on canvas
Acquired through the generosity of Helen and
Robert J. Appel, Classes of 1955 and 1953
2006.007

“Embodying the Object: Writing with the Collection” (ENGL 3850), Spring 2016
Cornell University

Life with Thistle

(In response to Otto Marseus van Schrieck’s *Still Life with Thistle*)

There’s nothing grand about a weed,
Its name a lisping whisper—
thistle, hissed and fading, barely a vowel to claim.
But look at the feast it provides,
This one crawling with light,
Insects picking their way over thorns too fibrous to fight through.
The lower leaves, drooping, rustle—
A snail slowly slowly conquers,
A lizard meets a grasshopper—and probably bids it farewell.
Look longer
The faint jewels of shells and beaded eyes,
The wisped enamel of a snake’s tongue.

—Irene Lin



Otto Marseus van Schrieck
Dutch, 1619–1678
Still Life with Thistle, ca. 1670
Oil on canvas
Gift of H. A. Metzger, Class of 1921, and Mrs. Metzger
60.195

Untitled

(In response to Robert Henri’s *Portrait of Carl Sprinchorn*)



Robert Henri
American, 1865–1929
Portrait of Carl Sprinchorn, 1910
Oil on canvas
Gift of Anna Sprinchorn Johnson
76.043

Whoever framed
You, shouldn’t have—

Your gaze, so stubbornly
Fixed outside your world, glaring
At what
Isn’t yours and will never be,
Because you are a painted moment of
Past reality

You set a face to last
A lifetime beyond
 White collared shirt,
 Light brushstroke off your collar—
Why?

Your twisted flower petal of a mouth
wanting
To express something so badly
It seems to bleed, almost,
Scarlet brushed downwards across
Coral

Do you think it defines you, your
Masculinity, your
Life if you turn
Your dark eyes elsewhere
Are you trying to see what is or
What is not there,
Are you oblivious that you are brushed
before
Darkness
That you are defined
By brushstrokes that you know (don’t you?)
Don’t matter but outside of you
Outside your frame you are
Gazing at
What does matter, but
Like you
That isn’t me

—Kite Miya

Ground in Stone

(In response to Stuart Davis's *Place des Vosges No. 2*)



Stuart Davis
American, 1894–1964
Place des Vosges No. 2, 1928
Oil on canvas
Dr. and Mrs. Milton Lurie Kramer,
Class of 1936, Collection;
Bequest of Helen Kroll Kramer
77.062.001

These streets guide me on their own
Each home so distinct
And Ms. Laroche
Hers is pink
Intentionally not so close to
And below the smoke
Which stinks
The smell seeps into the air
Somewhere less peaceful
These buildings belong
To the people
With no plans to leave

There are no lights lining these streets
No trouble in the day
In the night there are plenty of sounds
Paris has a way of filling the mind
With music
There's no one out on the porches now
Such a shame
I could use some distant conversation

I go through stages like performers
A new spotlight
Is a new routine
It reveals certain things
Others are dark
Unlit for a reason
All part of the scene
There are times it's better not to see
I learned to self-loathe
It made the words lose their sting
Those pests pass away
Once they pierce the skin

How do you act?
When everyone is watching
Well it's 3 AM
The sky is strangely playful
Hugging the hidden moon tight
The same color as these streets
So I suppose I'll keep walking
I fear I'll be here still after the sun has risen

—Paul Orshansky

“Embodying the Object: Writing with the Collection” (ENGL 3850), Spring 2016
Cornell University

Precipice

(In response to Tomory Dodge’s *Stacks*)

Beneath the white sun and salmon skies
This city’s skyline never sleeps
A garbage truck rumbles by
And adds another tower to the heaps
Of sorrows and regrets.
We watch as the penthouse suite
Struggles not to let
Go as it teeters
On the precipice of falling
Through bloodshot eyes we stumble
And add to our own towers
Young, we are not so humble
But we sit in 5 AM showers
Huddled in a corner
The curved silver mirror
Clenched in our forlorn
Quivering hands. I don’t get cleaner.
The sun streams in through the window
Sunrise splits the panes and awakens
A splitting pain. I let it go
Can tumbles, I make a
New pile. The
Crack
Hiss
Glug
Doesn’t leave. Its echoes
Stretch into the distance
A melancholy blue cloud creeping.

—Alex Pomerenk



Tomory Dodge
American, born 1974
Stacks, 2005
Oil on canvas
Gift of Aaron and Leslee Cowen
2008.067

“Embodying the Object: Writing with the Collection” (ENGL 3850), Spring 2016
Cornell University

Grace

(In response to Jean Metzinger’s *Sailboats*)

Once, like whales, they fought
To hold frankly, tighter, close
Between the putrid browning peaks of a teeming human sea
Where harbor is no promise,
And safe is in two;
Irreproachable,
Two lovers swam through the moon-shine about our heads
The words we breathe, and cut
Through slick oily tongues
Of water sweeter than a wet dream.
Their sails did not billow, hard lined
Faces drawn in efficient propulsion
Cut out of the spaces in the clouds.
Determination is little more than a crease in the brow;
Two bows too proud to stay
Making way for a coast no eyes have seen.
Pilgrimage is unworthy:
These souls sublimate through reason
And saunter through heaven’s door,
Self-assumed rapture.
Gliding past, this couple
Sailing between the stars and the sea,
I sought a word to hold down my wings, stop me slipping away
Losing touch in the afterglowing wake.

—Larry Runnels



Jean Metzinger
French, 1883–1956
Scene du Port (Sailboats), ca. 1912
Oil on canvas
Acquired through the Membership Purchase Fund
79.058.001

"Embodying the Object: Writing with the Collection" (ENGL 3850), Spring 2016
Cornell University

To Hue

(In response to William Trost Richards's *Breaking Waves*)

To rip. To sever. To break
the waves, wavebreaker, toothache.
Among the barnacles and fray the laugh
Of one who only grows.
Beware. Watery motes
And molecules have churned
Into an orgiastic wrath and spit between crags
Home only to salt, spume,
A mottled field of green.
This sea seems sickly—
Pea soup stirred in the sun a month too long.
Dragons' heads gather cumulus flames
Set to boil. Steeped in fume, this tooth
Is sore, sensitive, enamel worn
And not even mossy. It sits with a jealous bite
But the sea cannot be teased.
Alone, left beneath nameless stars, defend
Against amphibious assault—a being of only to rend,
To split, to pull apart. Pressing spray,
Cracking ribs. Shame floods
And scuttles an unhinged lust.
The gently jade green
Poised above its serfs bathes in fluttering light.
Clouds hiss around the shafts of stone that quake before the king.
The green, sparkling, watches.
Bland, tiny, never afraid, an emerald smudge
Whistles and snarls its moxie.
Warden, not judge, warding away salt-pocked
Wind-ruffled wave-breaking wistful hungry heads.
This is no place to shipwreck.
These waters are safe
Beyond that; no soul
Will splash in this bucktoothed maw.
No ghosts or sirens will gather on this spit. These teeth and swells
Are things with desire, and only one voyeur.

—Larry Runnels



William Trost Richards
American, 1833–1905
Breaking Waves, 1898
Oil on canvas
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Frederick Baekeland
99.077

“Embodying the Object: Writing with the Collection” (ENGL 3850), Spring 2016
Cornell University

Art History Museum

(In response to Edward Hopper’s *Monhegan Landscape*)

Am I the only one that ends up walking
through art museums clinging
to names mostly last names lend legitimacy
falling in love with use of color or depth as my high
school art history teacher would say see
she taught us a lot of things but mostly I just remember
how she made me feel when she said that Edward Hopper’s
most famous painting had no exits no
entrances
either but it seemed that people noted that
less often.

Nobody expected a door in this one, though
this one is just water just the startling slap of
a mouthful of salt water in the midst of paradise
my mother told me once never turn your back on the ocean

it would’ve hit me that
both she and Hopper knew there are no ways out
but
 instead
I’m here trying to remember the
period of the third floor paintings that stuck me as home
the name of the one with the hands I loved
the facts crumble as soon as I leave the gallery but Hopper
was here you see, I can feel it
like I can feel the
two and a half block walk from my apartment to the 6 train
in the morning it’s
all a series of names on signs I can’t remember
but know more intimately than the callouses of my own hands.

—Morgan Salama



Edward Hopper
American, 1882–1967
Monhegan Landscape, ca. 1916–19
Oil on panel
Gift of Herbert Gussman, Class of 1933
97.021

“Embodying the Object: Writing with the Collection” (ENGL 3850), Spring 2016
Cornell University

Let the Waves Be, As They May
(In response to Hassan Massoudy’s *Untitled*)

Ghana, 2014.

Remember the waves of the Atlantic Ocean
So forgiving; relentless all the same
To drown is to be done; yet
To stare at the waves from the windows
Of slave quarters is the worst kind of torture

The white of the castle walls are blinding --
The sunlight so bright, pupils dilate, burst through
Boundaries of brown hues of the iris
Light floods through your eyes and yet
You see nothing

Ithaca, 2016.

Waves of blue rush from clouds of grey
Seasonal affective disorder courses through
Veins so accustomed to gloom
They now host liquid that must be half
Fire, mostly ash

You wonder if the waves of blue only
Flooded your mind -- maybe a side effect
Of once-a-day 10mg Lexapro
Your eyes squint at the absence of sunlight
Today, the waves aren’t just in your head

—Eva Jahan



Hassan Massoudy
Born Iraq, 1944; lives and works in Paris
Untitled, 2012
Ink and pigment on paper
Acquired through the Jarett F. and Younghee Kim-Wait Fund
for Middle Eastern Arts
2014.006