PYXIS DEPICTING CHRIST’S ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM
Syria or northern Mesopotamia (Jazira); mid-13th century
Brass; hammered, chased, inlaid with silver and black compound
Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1971 (1971.39a, b)

This cylindrical box, called a pyxis, from Syria or northern Mesopotamia (Jazira), is decorated with an overall abstract vegetal and floral pattern over which are imposed a series of arches framing representations of Christian figures. A representation of the Virgin and Child appears on the lid. The box is one of a larger group of surviving objects with representations of Christian scenes, crafted in the typical, celebrated style and technique of Islamic silver-inlaid metalwork, popular in this region during the thirteenth century. What do the representations of Christian figures tell us about the possible functions and audiences for this work?

The box highlights the centrality of local culture and the cultural permeability between local Syrian Christian and Muslim communities of artists and patrons at this time. Objects from this group were probably used by both Christians and Muslims. The Christian themes, furthermore, satisfied a third audience, European Crusaders, who brought these objects back to Europe as souvenirs of their experience in the Holy Land.

Portable objects such as this silver-inlaid brass box played a central role in defining and mapping visual culture in the medieval Mediterranean world between the tenth and thirteenth centuries. The implications of portability and the relationships forged by portable works were vast and varied. Portability allowed an object to extend well beyond itself, traveling far and wide through space and time, forging and extending cultural relationships and connections, and, in the process, expanding identities and meanings.

—Eva Hoffman, Assistant Professor of Islamic Art, Tufts University