TEXTILE FRAGMENT
Italy, 14th century
Silk lampas, resembling damask, with a pair of lions and dragons in oval compartments set within larger frames, vine scroll, and floral motifs
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; gift of Mrs. Edward Jackson Holms

This fragment most likely formed part of a garment. Despite its fragmentary condition and faded colors today, it provides evidence for the role of silk textiles as the prime luxury medium for the circulation and exchange of a shared language of visual culture throughout the medieval Islamic, Byzantine, and European realms, and beyond. Known as early as Late Antiquity (i.e., the third to seventh centuries), this motif of paired animals in compartments continued to appear commonly in medieval textiles throughout the Mediterranean Constantinople, Spain, Egypt, Sicily, from the tenth to thirteenth centuries. Through the cultural exchange of textiles, this design was widely disseminated for use in the decoration of objects in a range of other media including ivory, metalwork, and ceramics. By the fourteenth century, this textile design, now with the added framing ogival pattern, was produced in Italy to meet both the local demand for luxury goods and also for export throughout the Mediterranean world.

The portable arts such as textiles 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