Flowers in a Vase, Rotch Art Collection, MIT Libraries. Imaging by Jenn Morris.

Side A

Refracted Histories through Stained Glass: 19th c. Islamic Windows as a Prism into MIT's Past, Present, and Future

Maihaugen Gallery, Distinctive Collections

Spring 2025, February 26–July 17, 2025

Curators
Gwendolyn Collaço and Rami Alafandi

Through facets of their narrative, these windows allow us to gaze into the history of architectural study at MIT and, by extension, the history of architecture as a modern university discipline in US and Europe. Their forms reflect key aspects of architectural design in the Middle East and diverse approaches to the craft of window-making, which inspired collectors and designers across the nineteenth to twentieth centuries. This legacy of Islamic design continues to spark the imaginations of architects and artists across the globe today.

Curators from the Aga Khan Documentation Center (AKDC) uncovered the narratives explored in this exhibition through historical and archival research, in collaboration with the Wunsch Conservation Lab. Together, they commissioned a project conservator and documented the process of carefully cleaning and stabilizing these windows for exhibition and long-term preservation. They teamed up with MIT's Department of Materials Science and Engineering and the Vitrocentre in Switzerland to run experiments that more precisely located the origins of the materials used in these windows. Their research led to the commission of works from contemporary artist Dima Srouji and artisan Mohamed El-Deeb inspired by the tradition of Islamic stained-glass windows.

Mountain crease
Valley crease
https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/coloringbooks

Peek inside!

Hidden within MIT's Distinctive Collections, many architectural elements from the earliest days of the Institute's architecture program still survive as part of the Rotch Art Collection. Among the artworks that were salvaged by conservators was a set of striking windows of gypsum and stained glass, dating to the late 18th- to 19th c. Ottoman Empire.

Similar stained-glass windows once graced the reception halls of elite homes, like al-Azam Palace in Damascus and Bayt al-Razzaz in Cairo. Such halls have quickly disappeared due to the ravages of time, war, and recent earthquakes. Yet even prior to these events, many Ottoman-era windows came to Europe and the United States decontextualized as architectural elements or as part of full reception halls from historic houses in the Islamic world, which visitors still admire today at institutions like the Victoria & Albert Museum in London and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

This exhibition illuminates the life of these historic windows, tracing their refracted histories from Egypt to MIT, their ongoing conservation, and the cutting-edge research they still prompt.

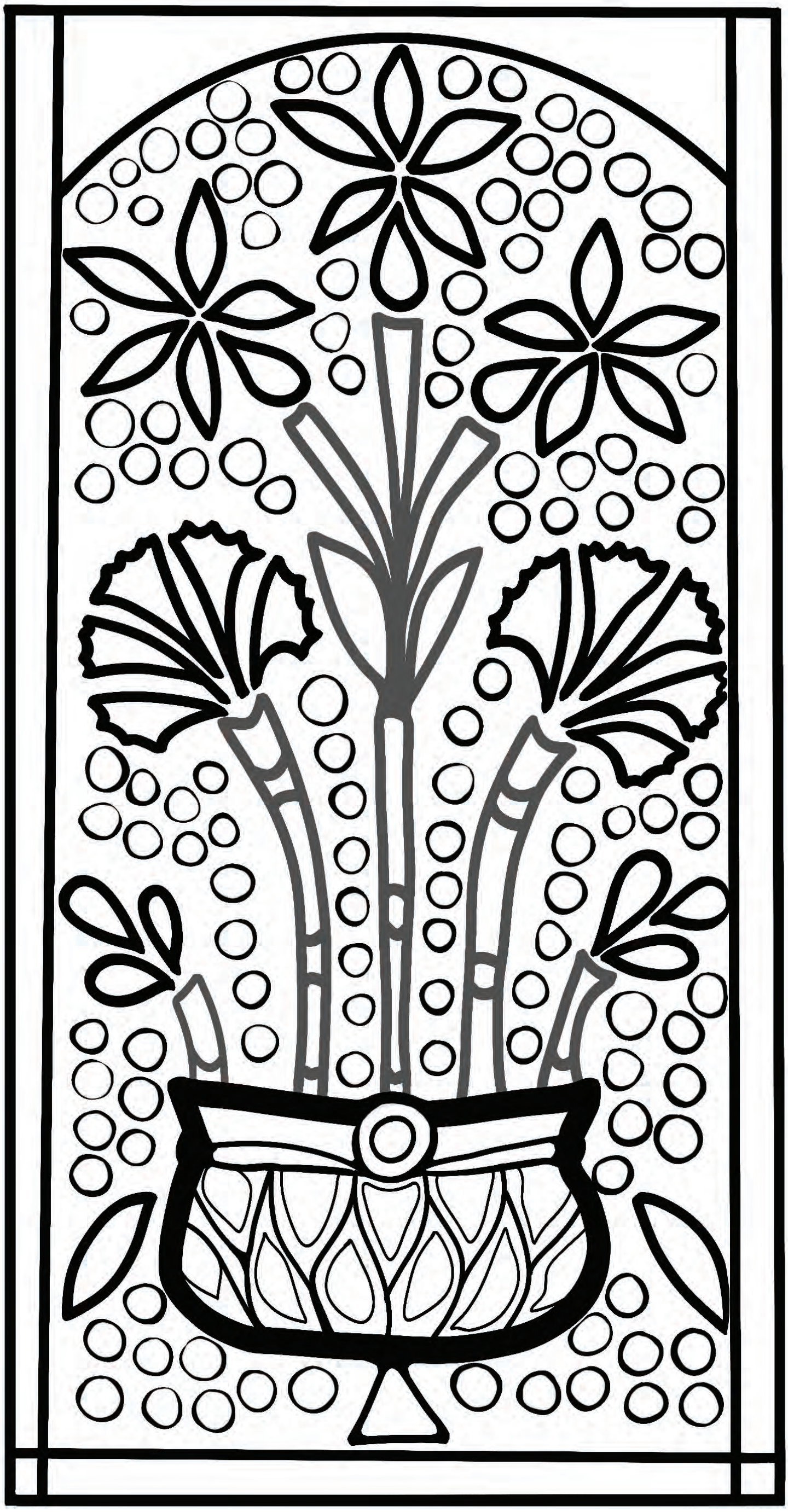

Illustration by Kai Alexis Smith

Side B