



# A journey of the displaced: Making sense of the reflections



[Dima Srouji](https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/author/dima-srouji/) (<https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/author/dima-srouji/>)

July 21, 2023

*The Jameel Fellowship programme invites contemporary artists and designers from the Middle East to spend time in residence at the V&A, as part of the Middle East section in the Asia Department. Focused on investigation rather than making, the Fellowships support the development of new lines of enquiry in the Fellows' work, facilitating artistic research in conversation with the V&A's extraordinary collections.*

*Dima Srouji was a Jameel fellow from 2022 – 2023.*

## AN INCONSISTENT PACE

Over the last year I had the opportunity to wander, think, sit in silence, and wrap myself in the chaos of V&A in South Kensington. The inconsistent pace of the experience makes writing this difficult. There were moments of slowness, and moments that catapulted me into offroads. It might require some time and distance to articulate a reflection with depth, but for now I have done my best to capture the moments both where the excitement and growth was visible, and other moments when I pulled myself into isolation in the quietest shadows of the museum. The experience was overwhelming because there is a spiritual overstimulation that comes from being surrounded by 1000s of objects with so much embedded within them. Some artefacts reminded me that my own body, displaced from Palestine, is dismembered, and how objects from home were similarly displaced and disrupted behind vitrines and in drawers. I found that my relationship to the objects would change based on my state of mind.

At the beginning, I chose to strip my process back – and made a very rational spreadsheet. I wanted to continue my research into the history of glass in the Middle East, so I organised a long list of 100 beautiful glass artefacts that I knew I wanted to see. I was going to explore how these treasures arrived at the V&A, who donated them, and who the agents of their displacement were.

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In the sheet I organised the objects into categories: Jugs, 'Grenades' (sphero-conical vessels), Manufacturing Waste, Perfume vessels, Toilet Flasks, etc. Another column catalogued who gifted the pieces. Very quickly, I realised that a process that was meant to help me engage with the collection was in fact doing the opposite. It turns out most of the vessels had an uncomfortable journey. In one example: Lord Howard de Walden and Seaford gifted 30 pieces, mostly from Syria, to the museum in 1927. These were on display in the [Seaford House](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seaford_House) ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seaford\\_House](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seaford_House)) until it was requisitioned in 1940. [Lord Howard de Walden](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Scott-Ellis,_8th_Baron_Howard_de_Walden) ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas\\_Scott-Ellis,\\_8th\\_Baron\\_Howard\\_de\\_Walden](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Scott-Ellis,_8th_Baron_Howard_de_Walden)) was a man of many hats: he wrote books and plays using a pseudonym, was a reserve for the British fencing Olympic team in 1908, and also owned the country's largest collection of arms and armour, including a 'beheading axe' of unknown origin.

Although I had many questions, and was curious to find images of the collection at the Seaford House from the family archive, I decided to leave this thread loose – because I was already pulling at countless others. I was also somehow satisfied with the imagined visual of dozens of glass vessels from Syria displayed in an English mansion that now is the Royal College of Defence Studies. I didn't need to see more.

On one of my walks in [Room 8 of the Medieval & Renaissance Galleries](https://www.vam.ac.uk/features/digitalmap/?floor=-1&zoom=2.883968948562985&latlng=-4489.160506294321%2C4719.270961512023&highlightId=FAC0000_49714) ([https://www.vam.ac.uk/features/digitalmap/?floor=-1&zoom=2.883968948562985&latlng=-4489.160506294321%2C4719.270961512023&highlightId=FAC0000\\_49714](https://www.vam.ac.uk/features/digitalmap/?floor=-1&zoom=2.883968948562985&latlng=-4489.160506294321%2C4719.270961512023&highlightId=FAC0000_49714)), I had a strange encounter with an elegant funerary bust that resembled my grandmother. The bust was inscribed in Aramaic 'Amat, daughter of Hagagu, descendent of Zebida, descendant of Ma'an. Alas! Amat comes from Palmyra, in Syria, which was destroyed by ISIS in 2015. In the first century of the common era, Palmyran families were buried in communal tombs that were marked with portraits known as *nefesh* ('breathe' in Arabic, and 'soul' in Aramaic), enabling them to exist in the afterlife. My grandfather had died, and I had visited our communal cemetery in Nazareth surrounded by cypress trees where we also leave portraits of the deceased on their tombs. My grandmother passed away a month later.

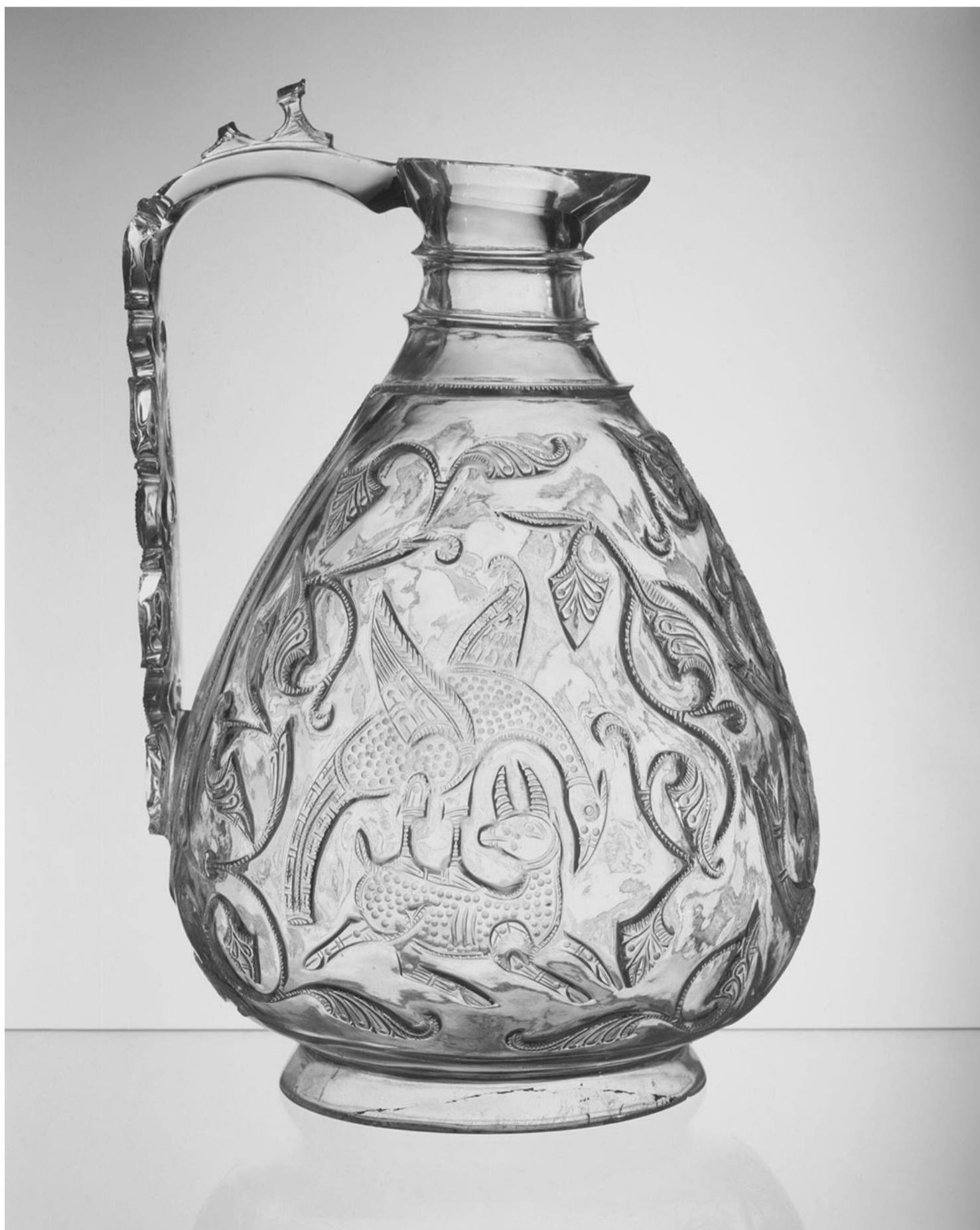
## SHEDDING SKIN THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

Losing a grandparent is a painful process, where a family sheds a big part of its collective memory. Showing the cut [rock crystal ewer](https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O69906/ewer-unknown/) (Museum no. 7904-1862) (<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O69906/ewer-unknown/>) in the Jameel gallery to a friend on a tour, it clicked for me that the process of shedding skin is analogous to shearing material from a surface to create something more delicate, more precious.

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Ewer, made 1000–1050. Museum no: 7904-1862 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

On other walks, mirrors grabbed my attention; there are thousands of them in the museum. I learned that the first glass image mirror was made in Sidon in Lebanon. Why didn't I know



Halfway through my residency, along with artist Babak Golkar and curator Ben Hinson, we took a few objects out of the glass gallery vitrines. I had to choose a handful of objects from my long list. Editing down forced me to shift my focus – from gathering as much information as possible about as many things as possible, to an intimate moment of slowness with a few pieces.



[\(https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O5545/pendant-unknown/\)](https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O5545/pendant-unknown/)

Pendant, late 16th century BC-15th century BC. Museum no. C.68-1936 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

One of them, a [glass cast pendant of the goddess Astarte \(C.68-1936\)](https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O5545/pendant-unknown/)

[\(https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O5545/pendant-unknown/\)](https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O5545/pendant-unknown/), had been calling me for a while. She felt familiar, almost maternal. Looking to find out more about Astarte, I dug into the archives. With the help of curator Reino Liefkes, we found the registry book of the Wilfred Buckley collection, donated to the museum in 1936. It turns out that the pendant, labelled in the gallery as from 'Syria' (possibly meaning Greater Syria) is actually almost certainly from Palestine, as multiple versions of the same Astarte glass pendant were found there by archaeologists I have researched in the past. The history of biblical and colonial archaeology was, and still is, intimately linked with the artefacts from my home, including sacred pendants of our goddesses and portraits of our ancestors. Holding it in my hand, the weathered layers

ceremonies for ritual cleansing in preparation for a new future.

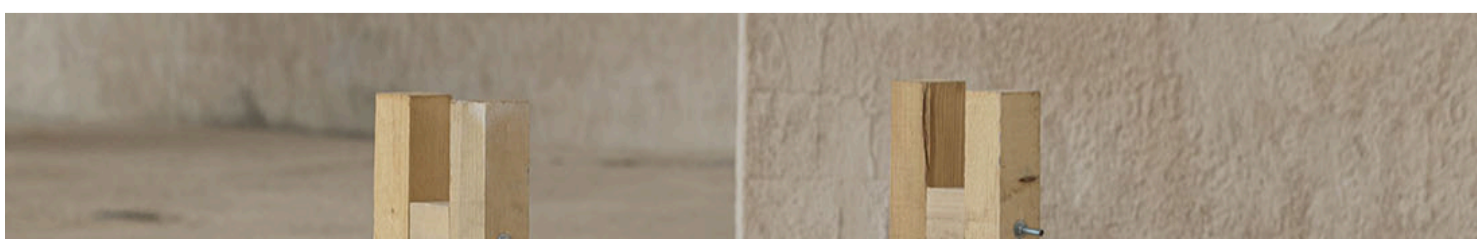


Ghosts by Dima Srouji, 2019. Image © Dima Srouji

Holding the pieces and examining their textures inspired a new collection as a second iteration of Ghosts, but in collaboration with glass blowers and forgery makers that produce ancient replicas for the black market. After all, the V&A is full of replicas.

## GLASS AND ARCHITECTURE

Another piece produced as an outcome of my research is inspired by the Ottoman coloured glass windows in the Jameel gallery, which I noticed during my many walks through the museum. I was commissioned by the [Diriyah Biennale Foundation \(https://biennale.org.sa/\)](https://biennale.org.sa/) to create a piece for the Islamic Art Biennial. At the time curator Mariam Rosser-Owen mentioned to me in passing that she and Fuchsia Hart did some research into these windows a few years prior. By coincidence, Fuchsia returned to the museum during my residency, and on her first day back I grabbed as much of her free time as possible to learn about the windows she had studied. The windows are very similar in their method of craft as the windows at the [Dome of the Rock \(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dome\\_of\\_the\\_Rock\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dome_of_the_Rock) and [Al-Aqsa Mosque \(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Aqsa\\_Mosque\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Aqsa_Mosque) in al-Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temple\\_Mount](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temple_Mount)). In the last two years, the Israeli Defense Forces broke 30 of them during their attacks on worshipers. Each window is hand-carved plaster, and takes 6 months to make. The back of the windows are carefully applied with glass fragments, with a second layer of plaster applied to the reverse to fix the glass to the window.







Maintaining the Sacred by Dima Srouji © Image Laurian Ghinitoui, 2023

My parents had just moved to Cairo, so I took the opportunity to go visit them and to go study as many of the coloured windows as I could find in the [Mosque of Ibn Tulun](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mosque_of_Ibn_Tulun) ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mosque\\_of\\_Ibn\\_Tulun](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mosque_of_Ibn_Tulun)), the [Gayer-Anderson Museum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gayer-Anderson_Museum) ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gayer-Anderson\\_Museum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gayer-Anderson_Museum)), and the [Museum of Islamic Art](https://mia.org.qa/en/) (<https://mia.org.qa/en/>).

This was the first time my thoughts about glass took me beyond the scale of an object, and towards architecture again – which is my background. An architectural education only briefly covers the history of glass in architecture, only starting with the Crystal Palace and Bruno Taut’s pavilion. There is much more research to be done on the use of glass in architecture in the Middle East.

Each rabbit hole I dived into opened possibilities to imagine and hallucinate over new histories and alternative futures. I’m excited to see where the offshoots take me. I am incredibly grateful to the team at the V&A, from the curators to the conservators, IT, and security staff that I met



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Each rabbit hole I dived into opened possibilities to imagine and hallucinate over new histories and alternative futures. I’m excited to see where the offshoots take me. I am incredibly grateful to the team at the V&A, from the curators to the conservators, IT, and security staff that I met and worked with over the last year. I imagine I will be back often to continue the research and dig deeper in the paths that I started here. My practice has shifted into a new space and I am excited to see where else it takes me.

*Dima Srouji’s work features in the [London Design Festival](https://www.londondesignfestival.com/stories/a-first-look-at-ldf23) (<https://www.londondesignfestival.com/stories/a-first-look-at-ldf23>).*

GLASS ([HTTPS://WWW.VAM.AC.UK/BLOG/TAG/GLASS](https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/tag/glass))

JAMEEL GALLERY ([HTTPS://WWW.VAM.AC.UK/BLOG/TAG/JAMEEL-GALLERY](https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/tag/jameel-gallery))

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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[. \(https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/author/dima-srouji\)](https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/author/dima-srouji)[. \(https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/author/dima-srouji\)](https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/author/dima-srouji)

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**Alexander Ogilviegraham**

[Jul 22, 2023 \(https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/museum-life/a-journey-of-the-displaced-making-sense-of-the-reflections#comment-870960\)](https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/museum-life/a-journey-of-the-displaced-making-sense-of-the-reflections#comment-870960)

A excellent blog more like this well written and crystal clear through the looking glass.



**Nicola**

[Aug 6, 2023 \(https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/museum-life/a-journey-of-the-displaced-making-sense-of-the-reflections#comment-871727\)](https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/museum-life/a-journey-of-the-displaced-making-sense-of-the-reflections#comment-871727)

I was touched by this blog post. Thank you for sharing.