FIGURE 12.1  Stucco panel. Iran, probably twelfth-thirteenth century with later restoration. 116 × 178 cm (45 11/16 × 70 1/16 in.). Maria Antoinette Evans Fund, deaccessioned (PHOTOGRAPH © 2016 MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON).
CHAPTER 12

My Dear Holmes: Arthur Upham Pope and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Laura Weinstein

During the 1920s and 30s, Arthur Upham Pope (1881–1969) was in nearly constant contact with the directors of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA), though his most active involvement came between 1930 and 1934. In this time, Pope and his wife, Phyllis Ackerman (1893–1977), served as ‘buyers’ agents,’ helping to bring approximately 200 objects into the collection of ‘Mohammedan’ art.¹ Though this seems at first to be a substantial contribution, Pope’s long-term impact on the Museum is in fact hard to discern. For although he undoubtedly ushered in a major transformation in the way Persian art was perceived and collected in the West, his efforts to advance appreciation of this material at the MFA were more persistent than fruitful. Despite the advantages of a close relationship with the Director and a philosophical kinship with the curator of ‘Mohammedan’ art, Pope remained an outsider, never establishing a firm platform from which to advance Persian art and his own reputation.

Unlike his role at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Pennsylvania Museum of Art, where he was involved in curating exhibitions and installing galleries, Pope’s work at the MFA was limited to acquisitions.² He began approaching the MFA with objects for sale in the early 1920s, at first with no particular area of specialization. In 1922 he wrote with thinly veiled frustration to several ‘gentlemen’ of the MFA professing astonishment by “your various communications declining with thanks Rembrandts, Michael Angelos, Flemish Primitives, Persian faience, Mesopotamian metal work, and Indian embroideries…”³ This

¹ This material was held within the Department of Chinese and Japanese art, today the Department of the Art of Asia, Oceania and Africa.
² For Pope’s time at the Art Institute, see Kadoi 2010; Kadoi 2012. As of 2015 there is not yet a published source for Pope’s work at the Pennsylvania Museum of Art, but research on this subject by Yael Rice is ongoing.
³ Letter from Arthur Upham Pope to unnamed MFA ‘gentlemen’, May 24, 1922. This and all letters cited below are in the archives of the MFA, with the exception of those listed as coming from Princeton University Library, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy Papers.