

AFRICAN ART COLLECTION

Somali people, Somalia

Qur'anic Amulet (xirsi)

Eighteenth century

Silver, agate, amber, ivory

9½ × 7½ in. (24.1 × 19.2 cm)

Gift of Katheryne Loughran and John Loughran, President,
Foundation for Cross Cultural Understanding

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Married Somali women collected lavish jewelry to demonstrate personal wealth and economic independence. In traditional Somali society, brides received necklaces and other items for personal adornment as wedding gifts, particularly items of substantial value, including gold, silver, and amber. In the event of widowhood or divorce, a woman could sell these items to ensure her survival. Large amber-beaded necklaces such as this one were considered a traditional and appropriate gift for a bride. In addition to its opulence, this necklace, with both the powerful substance of amber and a porte-Qur'an—a tubular pendant, here in silver—shields the wearer from disease and misfortune caused by evil forces. A Muslim cleric would have inserted paper inscribed with verses from the Qur'an into the pendant. Since the inscription, considered to be tantamount to the presence of Allah, offers the power of his protection, the pendant is referred to as xirsi, or "protection." Amber has an ancient reputation as a medicinal and spiritually protective substance, perhaps because rubbing pieces of amber together produces an electrical charge. Amber, copal, and stones that are blood-red in color, such as agate and carnelian, were thought to have healing and prophylactic powers; the Harn necklace, which includes both agate and amber, is thus a doubly fortified healing device.

