

# Shaping the World

The Arts of Islam: Treasures from the Nasser D Khalili Collection

Following the blockbuster exhibition of 2007 in Sydney, Australia, the world's largest collection of Islamic art arrives in the UAE capital of Abu Dhabi this month



Facing page: Combined *qiblah*-compass and sundial, or 'equatorial circle' (*Da'irat Al-Mu, addil*), signed by its maker, 'Ali. Istanbul. Dated 1161 AH (1748-49). Beaten, cast and engraved brass attached to a wooden base. 17.3 x 24.2 cm (diameter). © Nour Foundation.

TEXT BY CHARLOTTE SCHRIWER  
 PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTOPHER PHILLIPS  
 AND COURTESY OF THE KHALILI FAMILY TRUST

In recent years, Islam has become a focal point of interest in societies across the world, particularly as a culture and a religion that is little understood. Never before has there been a greater striving for understanding and harmony between cultures and religions, which is reflected not only politically, but also culturally. Major museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Louvre in Paris, are undertaking a complete refurbishment of their Islamic galleries in the wake of this growing interest and curiosity. Last year the Victoria and Albert Museum in London threw open its doors to reveal a new Islamic gallery; the result of a generous donation by the Jameel family, and a timely one in the current climate.

The Middle East, too, is seeing an equally exciting boom in cultural expansion; the Islamic Museum in Sharjah, UAE, is currently being refurbished and the new Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar, is due to open in March. In Abu Dhabi the government is undertaking a massive project to build a cultural district, which aims to house branches of world-class museums as well as local museums.

Never has an exhibition from a private collection of Islamic art of this scale been shown before.

Within this cultural boom lies an increasing interest in the arts of Islam; perhaps an artistic culture that is less known and talked of within the broader world of art. A reflection of this keen worldwide curiosity and interest can be seen in the overwhelming response to the recently exhibited objects from the Nasser D Khalili Collection of Islamic Art at the Art

Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia. 'The Arts of Islam: Treasures from the Nasser D Khalili Collection' ran from June to September 2007 and was the largest and most comprehensive exhibition of Islamic art ever

to be seen in Australia. It was deemed "the most successful exhibition we have ever had in the history of our museum" by Edmund Capon, the Director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. The first 2000 editions of the accompanying exhibition catalogue sold out before the end of the first month. In another demonstration of the event's enduring success, the specially commissioned music that accompanied the show, which was composed and performed by local Australian artists Kim Cunio and Heather Lee, and appropriately called '*Ishq*' (Divine Love), sold over 1000 copies within the same four-week period.



With over 20,000 pieces of Islamic art, in addition to renowned collections of Japanese, Spanish and Swedish art, the scholar, collector and philanthropist owns the largest known private collection of Islamic art in the world.

Bridging Cultures

This was the intention and the expectation of the man who founded the collection, Professor Nasser D Khalili. With over 20,000 pieces of Islamic art, in addition to renowned collections of Japanese, Spanish and Swedish art, the scholar, collector and philanthropist owns the largest-known private collection of Islamic art in the world, a claim of which he is justly proud. His aim is to use his art as a bridge between cultures; to create greater understanding, peace and harmony by offering this extraordinary collection of beautiful objects for all to see and appreciate. "Religion and politics have their own language," says Khalili. "The language of art is universal." The enormous success and popularity of the unprecedented Sydney exhibition is certainly a reflection of, and homage to, his philosophy.

Centuries of Skill

'The Arts of Islam' was not only about the beauty of Islamic art but also about the craftsmanship and skill with which these objects were crafted. Aimed at educating and informing the Australian public, the show exhibited the breadth of artistic achievement in Islam from its beginnings in the seventh century through to the early 20th century, using a chronological approach covering four main periods in Islamic history. More than 350 objects - from dazzling illuminated Qur'ans, intricately designed metalwork and wonderfully minutely detailed manuscripts to finely potted ceramics and colourful jewelled objects - were displayed in seven rooms, each devoted to a period of unique artistic production. As a reflection of the importance of the word of God in the development of Islamic



art, the central focus of the Sydney exhibition, however, was a large, central room with high ceilings, which was devoted to the arts associated with prayer and pilgrimage in Islam, around which all other rooms were placed.

The high walls of this central space, painted in a deep dark blue, were perfect for giving suitable presence to a number of spectacular textiles, including intricately embroidered black *Ka'aba* coverings and silk cenotaph covers, as well as manuscripts and miniature paintings related to the *Haji*. A particularly stunning object on display was a mosque lamp dating from the Mamluk period (1250-1517), a glass vessel housing a beaker filled with oil and suspended from the rim by a chain. Here, it had been placed on a high plinth in its own case, with a single light shining through it from underneath, subtly illuminating the gold, blue, red and green enamels of the glass. An inscription from a chapter of the Qur'an entitled

Facing page: Noah's Ark from 'Jami' Al-Tawarikh' by Rashid al-Din. Iran, Tabriz. Dated 714 AH (1314-15). Ink, translucent and opaque watercolour, gold and silver on paper. 14 x 25.5 cm (painting). © Nour Foundation.

Above: Pair of door-knockers. One of the items to be displayed in Abu Dhabi. Mamluk Egypt or Syria. 15th century. Brass or bronze, cast and engraved. 29.8 x 25.2 cm; diameter of base-plate 17.5 cm. © Nour Foundation.

'Light' (*Surah XXIV*, Verse 35), saying "God is the Light of the heavens and the earth." The parable of "His Light is as if there were a Niche and within it a Lamp: the lamp enclosed in Glass" is inscribed on the rim of the lamp, alluding to light as a quality of the divine.

Spiritual Spotlight

Perhaps a crowning touch to a display of objects whose beauty and craftsmanship really speak for themselves was a 'dome' of light, designed by renowned Sydney architect, Richard Johnson, who designed the exhibition. The dome, which was composed of a series of lights hung on concentric lighting racks and suspended from the high ceiling, enhanced the atmosphere surrounding the objects. With the quietly sounding *adhan* playing in the background, it is no wonder that those who entered into this exceptionally tranquil space became truly mesmerised.

Further highlights of the Sydney exhibition included a selection of stunning illuminated Qur'ans, dating from as far back as the ninth century; a particularly spectacular example



was a complete Qur'an from Mamluk Egypt, dated 1382-83, which was one of a handful of Qur'ans written entirely in gold and embellished with marginal decoration. It is a superb example of the artistry of manuscript production in this period.

well as the minutely and exquisitely detailed miniature paintings from the Houghton 'Shahnamah', which tells the story of Iran from its mythological beginnings to the Muslim conquests in the seventh century.

Mughal Magic

Additional key pieces from the secular arts included stunning jewelled objects crafted for the courts of the Mughal emperors, including a gold flask studded with precious stones such as diamonds and emeralds. Fine examples of miniature painting

A spectacular display of artworks from across 12 centuries, spanning a region from China in the East to Spain in the West, and Africa in the South to the Mongolian steppe in the North.

in the exhibition, which were also considered to be major highlights, were the rare and interesting pages from the 'Jami' Al-Tawarikh' (Compendium of Chronicles) by Rashid Al-Din, as

fortunate for the public in Sydney and the rest of Australia, who were given a rare chance to understand more about a religion and culture in whose essence lies the beauty of the divine, and in the devotion to the word of God.

Facing page: Flask (*surahi*). Rajasthan, Jaipur. 18th century. Gold, partly enamelled and set with diamonds in gold *kundan*. 24 x 13 cm (diameter). © Nour Foundation.  
 Above  
 Left: Pendant in the form of an eagle. One of the items to be displayed in Abu Dhabi. Mughal India. 18th century. Gold, cast and chased, set with foiled diamonds, rubies, emeralds and sapphires in gold *kundan*. 8.5 x 6.5 cm. © Nour Foundation.  
 Right: Gold snuffbox in the form of a mango. One of the items to be displayed in Abu Dhabi. Mughal India. Circa 1750. Gold, cast and engraved, enamels, rubies, emeralds and diamonds. 6.5 cm (height). © Nour Foundation.

Abu Dhabi Arrival

Following the tremendous popularity and success of the Sydney exhibition, Professor Khalili was approached by the tourism authorities of Abu Dhabi, who had taken the trouble to travel

from Abu Dhabi to Sydney to view the exhibition. 'The Arts of Islam' exhibition is now scheduled to open in late January in Abu Dhabi and will continue until late May. This time, however, the number of objects will exceed 500, including recent acquisitions which are true masterpieces and which reflect the exceptional scope and variety of the skill of Islamic artists and craftsmen. Never before has an exhibition from a private collection of Islamic art of this scale been shown; the largest exhibition ever displayed to date was held in 1976 at the Hayward Gallery in London, and opened by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, with approximately 600 pieces on show. However, those pieces were on loan from more than 120 major museums and institutions, whereas in the forthcoming exhibition to be held in Abu Dhabi there is only a single lender - the Nasser D Khalili Collection of Islamic Art - who has loaned almost the same number of objects. This exhibition will be an unprecedented event and one that is eagerly anticipated.



Above: Half of an illuminated frontispiece from part 28 of a 30-part Qur'an, written for Qutb Al-Din Muhammad ibn Zangi ibn Mawdud, ruler of Sinjar and Nisibin in foliated *Kufic* inside poly-lobed medallions illuminated with arabesques in two tones of gold. Jazira, Southeast Turkey, Sinjar or Nisibin. 1198-1219. 22 x 15.6 cm (folio). © Nour Foundation.

Facing page  
 Left: Bowl adorned with birds. Syria. Late 12th century. Stonepaste ware, painted in olive-brown lustre over a transparent glaze. 7.2 x 23 cm (diameter). © Nour Foundation.  
 Right: Shallow dish. One of the items to be displayed in Abu Dhabi. Probably Egypt. Eighth to ninth century. Transparent aquamarine glass, blown and tooled, decorated in bronze lustre, bleeding, dull yellow. 4 x 25.1 (diameter). © Nour Foundation.

Designing Magnificence

Created by exhibition architect Colin Morris, the Abu Dhabi exhibition will take on a slightly different feel that in Sydney. This time it has been divided into two main areas; art associated with the word of God, followed by a chronological display of objects related to the Court Arts of Islam.

The part devoted to the arts associated with the word of God, of course, includes objects related to the Qur'an, prayer and pilgrimage and foremost among these a sumptuous display of illuminated Qur'ans dating from the seventh to the 19th century. It also includes additional pieces added since the Sydney exhibition, as well as scientific instruments such as elaborately decorated astrolabes and finely executed *qiblah*-compasses which were cleverly designed to help the faithful find the correct direction of prayer.

A new acquisition is an extremely rare and unusual 19th-century watercolour view of Mecca that shows every house, mosque, street and tree in wonderfully minute detail. A pair of rare door-knockers, dating from Mamluk Egypt or Syria, executed in intricately detailed open metalwork, will also add to this dazzling display of objects. Highlights from the second half of the exhibition are equally stunning. These include a magnificent 17th-century snuffbox in the shape of a mango from Mughal India, which is covered in diamonds



The number of objects [in Abu Dhabi] will exceed 500, including recent acquisitions which are true masterpieces reflecting the exceptional scope and variety of the skills of Islamic artists and craftsmen.

on one side and rubies on the other. Also on display will be a rare 18th-century, jewelled gold falcon, beautifully embellished with rubies, sapphires and a large diamond on its breast and holding three, small, polished pearls in its beak. A similar object is in the Al-Sabah Collection in Kuwait. Delicately potted, lustre-painted ceramics dating from 12th-century Syria, resembling precious metalwork, will be a new highlight in this exhibition, as well as an elaborately decorated glass lustre dish from ninth-century Egypt, the only known intact object of its kind from the region.

Accompanying this spectacular display of artworks from across 12 centuries, spanning a region from China in the East to Spain in the West, and Africa in the South to the Mongolian steppe in the North, will be a fully illustrated catalogue,

published in Arabic and English. In addition, a symposium of renowned local and international scholars, a series of lectures, and other stimulating educational and public programmes are planned in conjunction with the exhibition. 'The Arts of Islam: Treasures from the Nasser D Khalili Collection' will undoubtedly be one of the most thrilling and moving cultural events ever to be held in the Middle East, and it will leave a lasting impact on the region. 📖

**'The Arts of Islam: Treasures from the Nasser D Khalili Collection' will take place at Emirates Palace, Abu Dhabi, from 23 January to 31 April. For further information on the collection, visit [www.khalili.org](http://www.khalili.org)**