

What is Islamic Art?

Visits to the World's Greatest Museums Specializing in Islamic Art

The Great Collections of Islamic Art

The Unifying Aesthetic Force of Islam: Interviews with Leading Art Collectors

ISLAM AND ART

A Special Edition of the Muslim World League Journal



*The display of Islamic art in
Western societies is an example
of the cultural communication
between Muslim and non-Muslim
communities around the world.”*

– H.E. Sheikh Dr. Mohammad bin Abdulkarim Al-Issa
during a tour of the Metropolitan Museum of Art,
October 2019

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Art is fundamental to building bridges of cultural communication between Muslim and non-Muslim communities around the world.

—Dr. Mohammad Al-Issa





Museums house very rare collections that show the level of Islamic civilization that radiated from the source of Islamic civilization in Makkah and Medina and spread values of mercy, peace and coexistence throughout the world.

—Dr. Mohammad Al-Issa



PRESENTING ISLAM

Through its Material Culture

When the Islamic galleries of the New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art reopened in 2011 after eight years of renovation, it was celebrated as a watershed moment for promoting American understanding of the Islamic world. With much society fanfare, live performances and lectures, the museum’s 15 new galleries brought audiences into “a physical world of lavish carpets, ceramics and miniature paintings.” Since the Met’s Islamic revival, other great museums have followed suit: the Louvre in Paris and the British Museum in London have also invested in spectacular new galleries for Islamic art. In 2015 alone, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Baltimore’s Walters Art



The culture that emanates from religions, their symbolic treasures and their works of art, must be better known and better transmitted”

—Philippe Gaudin, Director of the European Institute for the Science of Religions in Paris September 2019, where Dr. Al-Issa keyed a major international conference on interfaith dialogue

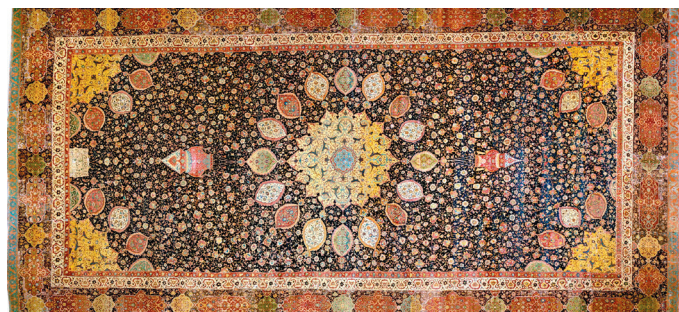
Museum, and the Dallas Museum of Art have each held an exhibition dedicated to the genre.

There are also some “unexpected” masterpiece-collections, such as the David Collection in Copenhagen, which houses an illustrious collection of works amassed by a Danish-Jewish businessman who developed a keen eye for and great taste in Islamic art. Since



Detail of arabesque decoration at the Alhambra palace complex in Grenada, Spain.

then, great exhibits in the West have been nearly non-stop, such as in Los Angeles with the 2018 “Past, Present and Future” exhibit that combined traditional and modern Arab-Muslim art within a seamless context of mutual re-interpretation and thematic consistency—that is, the timelessness of past as present and the future as new wisdom about that past. The expansion of Islamic art to an increasing number of Western audiences could not come at a better time. As Dr. Sheila Canby, former head of the Department of Islamic Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, explained it: “In the wake of 9-11 and events like the destruction of ancient sites in Iraq and Syria, museums serve as a place where people can come to this idea of Islam through the material culture, not just through what they are being told all the time.” It is in honor of such material culture as a means by which to present Islam in its most complete expression that this issue is dedicated.



The famous Ardabil Carpets, completed in the mid-16th century, are considered among the finest extant Persian carpets in the world.

ART IN REVIEW



Dr. Al-Issa visits the Islamic galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

FEBRUARY 2017

Dr. Mohammad Al-Issa visited the **Nationalbibliotek in Vienna**, which houses 7.5 million documents and books, to meet local scholars and orientalists—Western specialists on the Islamic and Asian East. Dr. Al-Issa described the care given to Islamic manuscripts and papyrus by the library as “clear evidence of the high values given to its historical treasures.” The “orientalists,” he said, “have contributed to the dissemination of Islamic heritage with a sense of fairness to its meaning, highlighting the great elements of this civilization.”

JUNE 2018

Dr. Al-Issa visited the **Laurentian Library in Florence**. This library was built in 1571 for the powerful Medici family, its architecture designed by Michelangelo. The library houses 11,000 manuscripts and 4,500 early printed books, nearly all gems of the lavish Italian bookmaking tradition. Dr. Al-Issa toured the library with its director and senior officials, reviewing historical documents and the elaborate tomes gracing its vaults, among which are 100 different editions of the Holy Qu’ran.

OCTOBER 2018

The Muslim World League signed a cooperation agreement with the **Uffizi Gallery in Florence**, Italy, one of the oldest and most famous art institutions in Europe. The agreement seeks to implement educational and cultural initiatives promoting historical Islamic civilization and to support initiatives aimed at developing and promoting intercultural dialogue.



The Ambrosia Library in Milan displays some of the manuscripts from the vast collection held at the library.



Through its brilliant use of color and its superb balance between design and form, Islamic art creates an immediate visual impact. Its strong aesthetic appeal transcends distances in time and space, as well as differences in language, culture, and creed. Islamic art not only invites a closer look but also beckons the viewer to learn more.

— Los Angeles County Museum of Art in their website overview of that museum's Islamic art collection.

APRIL 2019

While on a trip to **St. Petersburg, Russia**, for a speech on the theme of peace and civilization at the Oriental Studies Department of Saint Petersburg State University, Dr. Al-Issa visited the **State Hermitage Museum**. This great European museum houses one of the most renowned collections of Islamic art in the world. Its director, Dr. Mikhail Piotrovsky, is himself an Arabist and has commented: "Russia is as much Islamic as it is Christian. Islam is an integral part of our culture."

SEPTEMBER 2019

The inauguration of the **French Institute for Islamic Civilization** in **Lyon** took place with Dr. Al-Issa in attendance alongside the mayor of that city. The project had been in development for thirty years in an effort to establish an institution by which cultural exchange between

the three Abrahamic faiths might break down barriers and fight extremism. French Interior Minister Christophe Castaner was also at the opening ceremony.

OCTOBER 2019

The Muslim World League announced with the government of Indonesia the establishment of a branch of the largest historical museum dedicated to the life of the **Prophet Mohammad** (Peace Be Upon Him) and **Islamic Civilization** in **Jakarta**. The museum's headquarters in Madinah were opened under the patronage of Prince Faisal bin Salman bin Abdulaziz, governor of that holy city. Since the opening of the museum, the MWL has received requests from twenty-four countries to help establish branches based upon the life of the Prophet.



Dr. Al-Issa visited the New York Public Library in October 2019.

OCTOBER 2019

On a visit to **New York City**, Dr. Al-Issa explored the **New York Public Library's** magisterial collection of religious texts. He also visited the newly expanded Islamic art and antiquities galleries at the **Metropolitan Museum of Art** during a private tour with curator Dr. Navina Haidar and viewed a special exhibition of Arabic calligraphy, one of the most characteristic artistic expressions of the Islamic spirit. The Metropolitan Museum of Art is home to thousands of works of Islamic masterpieces.

NOVEMBER 2019

Dr. Al-Issa visited the **Roskilde Cathedral** in **Copenhagen**, Denmark, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and burial church for the Danish Royal Family. In speaking with the church leadership, Dr. Al-Issa underscored how common values between faiths are most powerfully expressed in great religious architecture that glorifies God.

JANUARY 2020

This week, Dr. Al-Issa visited the historic **Ambrosian Library** in **Milan**, founded by Cardinal Federico Borromeo in 1609. The great Cardinal dedicated this palace to multicultural learning, with an emphasis on dialogue and learning from other cultures and faiths.



Dr. Al-Issa visits the Laurentian Library in Florence during a trip to Italy.

Arabic texts are part of the historical collection at the Laurentian Library in Florence.

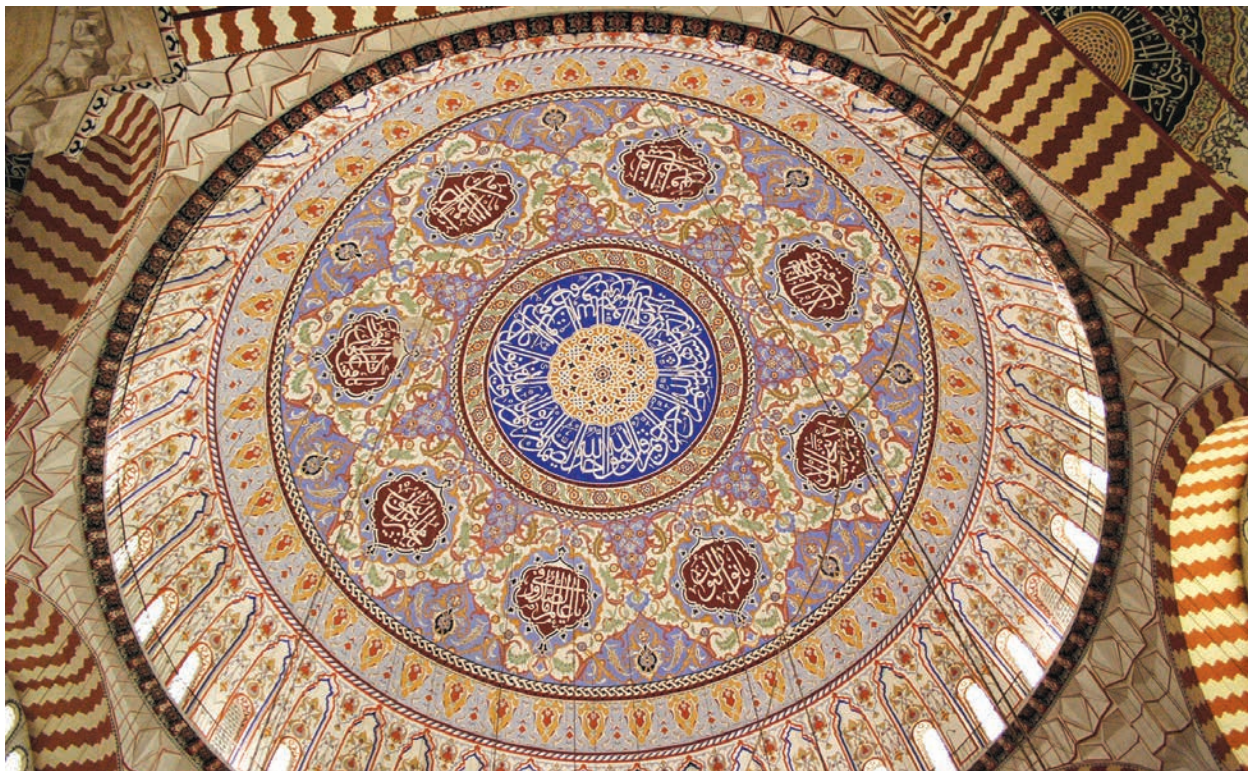
Dr. Al-Issa views manuscripts on display at the Vienna National Library in Austria.





WHAT, EXACTLY, IS ISLAMIC ART?

Editorial Staff of the Journal of the Muslim World League | January 2020



A classic example of Islamic geometric pattern from the Selimiye Mosque, Turkey.

The answer to the question, “What is Islamic Art?” might best be found in defining the “personality of Islamic art,” the phrase coined by the late legendary French scholar Oleg Grabar. This marks a practical approach to the complexity and diversity of art that is called “Islamic.” The formal name of the Islamic art collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is “The New Galleries for the Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and Later South Asia.” The title alone encapsulates the challenge of defining Islamic art. Traditionally in Western scholarship, this challenge came down to three main concerns. First, whether one chose

to emphasize the local and regional differences in the arts in predominantly Muslim countries or the “unity” of these arts across the Islamic world. Second was whether the adjective “Islamic” should be used in the same way as “Gothic” or “Baroque,” suggesting a kind of epochal and stylistic definition. The third concern, expressed by Dr. Grabar, was that Islamic art might be seen as a “special overlay” and a “symbiosis between local and pan-Islamic modes of artistic expression.” In other words, the term “Islamic” would be not so much a means of categorizing art as a kind of verbal image of an aesthetic melting pot, one consisting

🗨️ *Our task is to find a common denominator between a mosque and a ceramic plate.*

— Dr. Oleg Grabar, renowned Harvard University scholar of Islamic art

of all previous traditions, Muslim or not, that came into the Muslim fold through territorial conquest. This relates to the interpretation of “Islamic” as a culture or civilization in which the majority of the population or at least a ruling element profess the faith of Islam.

a. Islamic—But Not Islam?

This third view brings into the debate the point that the term “Islamic,” in this context, can refer to monuments that have little if anything to do with the Islamic faith. There is, for instance, what Grabar called “Jewish Islamic art,” produced in the large Jewish communities that have lived within the predominantly Muslim world. He included representative examples of this Jewish art in his book on Arab painting. There is also “Christian Islamic art,” most easily illustrated by metalwork from the Fertile Crescent in the 13th century and Coptic art that emerged in Egypt after the 7th century.

Christian Islamic art or Jewish Islamic art may be the product of the swift spread of Islam in the 7th century, when Islamic rulers absorbed rather than seek to annihilate previous traditions. This adaptation may be defined on two levels. One is vertical—artistic traditions of a particular geographic area from Spain to Central Asia that became “Islamic” because of very precise new characteristics. The second level is the horizontal—a uniformity in these characteristics, such that “the art of Cordoba in the 9th century is closer to that of Samarkand than Compostela,” wrote Grabar. This horizontal interpretation presents Islamic art in its most extraordinary light, because it shows how art—and not physical place, distance, region or history—primarily reflected Islamic civilization. “In A.D. 700 Cordoba and Samarkand had probably not even



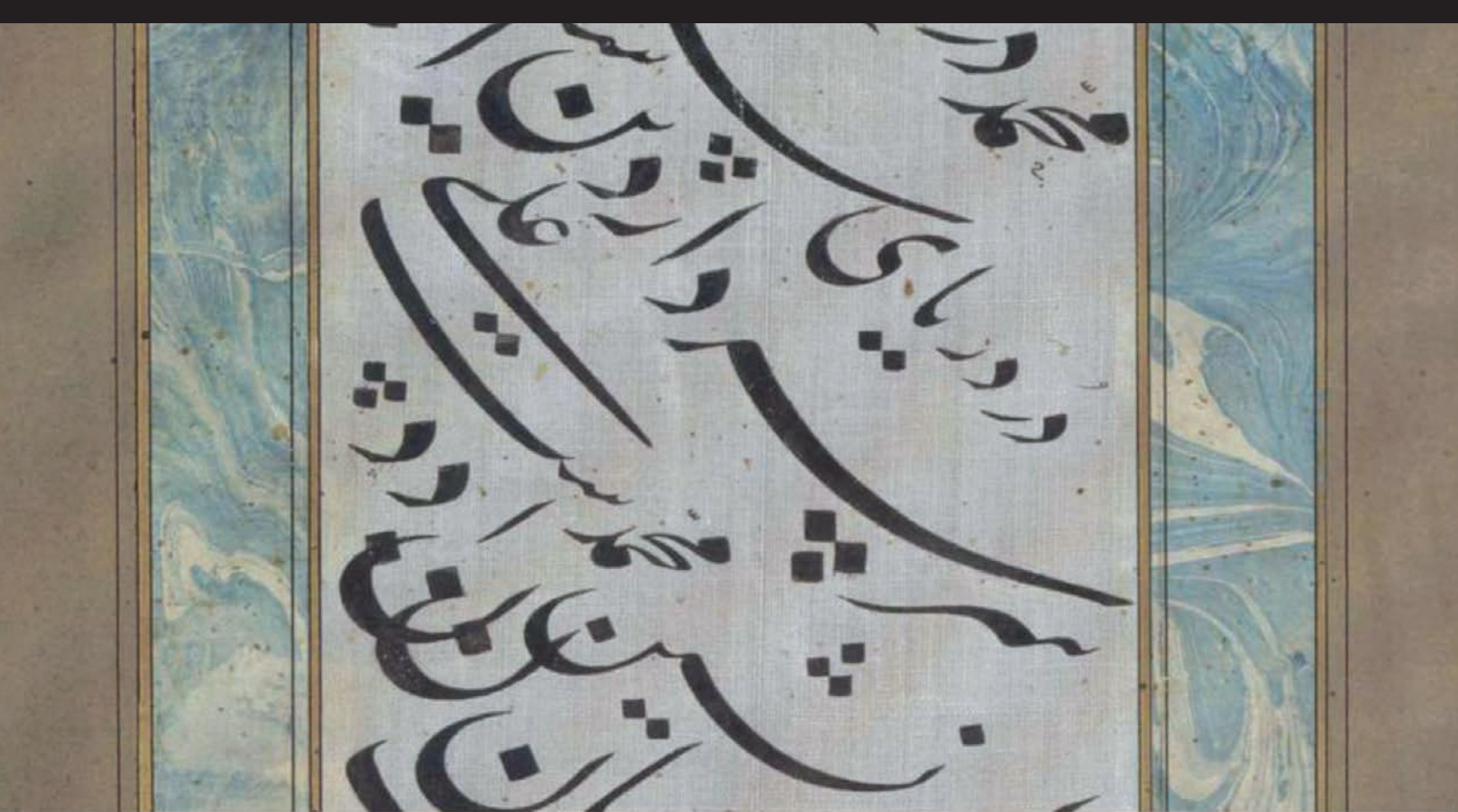
Tile art from the 17th century Wazir Khan Mosque in Pakistan.

heard of each other; in 800 they belonged together...,” as Grabar wrote. “As late as 1450 Constantinople was a Christian citadel of Byzantine art; by 1500 its art was comparable to the art of Delhi or to that of Marrakesh.”

b. Art’s Interfaith Dialogue: Cross-Current Influences

It is said that the Arabs, before Islam, had hardly any art except poetry, in which they took great pride. The Muslim Arabs borrowed their art from Persia and Byzantium, Islamizing the elements they borrowed in a manner “that fused them into a homogenous spiritual-aesthetic complex.”

The evolution of physical, decorative Islamic art was a gradual one. At first, conquering Arabs adopted the “superior native arts” they found in Syria, Mesopotamia, Egypt and Iran. In Egypt, Coptic communities were employed as builders of mosques and palaces and as weavers in the state manufacturing centers established under



The calligraphy of Daud Hossani, Afghan calligrapher to Kings. Images from the Berlin State Museum / Haschmat Hossaini

the rule of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties, with definitive Coptic traditions incorporated. For example, Muslim artists of the 7th and 8th centuries borrowed the vine ornament “as may be seen on a beautifully carved panel from a prayer pulpit found in Takrit North of Baghdad.” From the Coptic people, according to the Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin, “the Arabs learned the art of wood and bone inlay.”

Gradually, an unmistakable Islamic style began to dominate. Arab artists developed a new style of carving stone, stucco and wood known as the slant or beveled style, and “this new style strongly emphasized the abstract character of Islamic ornament.” By the 9th century, this art “had abandoned all relation to the Hellenic past.”

c. Territorial vs. Spiritual Conquest

Once Muslim culture could express itself visually, doctrines on the arts and art inspired by faith were soon to follow. Islam had inherited an immense set of collective memories, legends and myths—whether those of a village cult or an entire people. As one scholar noted, “This all means that the point of departure of Islamic art

does not lie merely in a physical or aesthetic reaction to another art but in the actual utilization by the Muslim world of the material aesthetical and emotional order of the conquered territories.”

d Calligraphy: The Noble Art

The “flourishes” of Islamic decorative art are unmistakable: vine patterns, palmettes, lattice-work wood carving, geometric shapes and arabesques --and most of all, the art of calligraphy. Calligraphy is the most important and pervasive element in Islamic art, and it has always been considered the noblest form of art because of its association with the Qur’an. As scholars at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art have written, “this preoccupation with beautiful writing extended to all arts,” and this included “secular manuscripts; inscriptions on palaces; and those applied to metalwork, pottery, stone, glass, wood, and textiles.” It also applied to non-Arabic-speaking peoples within the Islamic commonwealth whose languages – such as Persian, Turkish, and Urdu – were written in the Arabic script.

Calligraphy remains a source of contemporary fascination. For example, through the end of May 2020, the famous Pergamon Museum in Berlin is host to an exhibit on the modern Afghan calligraphic master, Daud-Al-Hossaini (1894-1979). "Whether microscopic or monumental, al-Hossaini mastered all forms," states the museum website. "He delicately inscribed rice grains with Quranic suras, penned over 550 words in a 2.5 cm square composition and designed architectural inscriptions like those that adorn Kabul's Triumphal Arch (Taq-e Zafar). Cultural advisor to the last Afghan King, Muhammad Zahir Khan (r. 1933-1973) and director of the national printing industry, al-Hossaini remained a passionate calligrapher throughout his life."



Bowl of Reflections, a 13th century Persian example of Islamic pottery.



The term Islamic art may be confusing to some. It not only describes the art created specifically in the service of Islam, but it also characterizes secular art produced in lands under Islamic rule or influence, whatever the artist's or the patron's religious affiliation ...Although this is a highly dynamic art, which is often marked by strong regional characteristics as well as by significant influences from other cultures, it retains an overall coherence that is remarkable given its vast geographic and temporal boundaries. Of paramount concern to the development of this singular art is Islam itself, which fostered the creation of a distinctive visual culture with its own unique artistic language.



Early Chinese blue and white porcelain formed in a traditionally Middle-Eastern shape, ca. 1335.

—The Islamic Department of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art

The Human Image: Forbidden or Not?

Conventional wisdom assumes that Islam is theologically opposed to the representation of living beings. The Qu'ran, however, does not explicitly prohibit the depiction of human figures.

This aniconism, the avoidance of images of sentient beings, is based in part on the prohibition of idolatry and in part on the belief that creation of living forms is exclusive to God. The corpus of hadith—that is, sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him)—contains more explicit prohibitions of images of living beings, challenging painters to “breathe life” into their images and threatening them with punishment on the Day of Judgment. In the Qu'ran (3:49, 5:113), reflecting an account in the New Testament, it is counted among the miracles of Christ that he made likenesses of birds from clay “by God's order” and when he breathed into them, they became real birds, again, “by God's order.” Muslim scholars have sought to interpret these prohibitions in different ways, depending on the context. Nevertheless, Islamic art has been characterized by the absence of figures and emphasizes instead extensive use of calligraphic, geometric and abstract floral patterns.

As the early 20th century German-Swiss scholar of Islamic art Titus Burckhardt wrote:

“The absence of icons in Islam has not merely a negative but a positive role. By excluding all anthropomorphic images, at least within the religious realm, Islamic art aids man to be entirely himself. Instead of projecting his soul outside himself, he can remain in his ontological centre where he is both the vice-regent (khalifa) and slave ('abd) of God. Islamic art as a whole aims at creating an ambience which helps man to realize his primordial dignity; it therefore avoids everything that could be an 'idol', even in a relative and provisional manner. Nothing must stand between man and the invisible presence of God. Thus Islamic art creates a void; it eliminates in fact all the turmoil and passionate suggestions of

the world, and in their stead creates an order that expresses equilibrium, serenity and peace.”

Islamic aniconism rejects both images that might become idols and figures of living things, and attributes to the artist “a violation of the sanctity of the principle of life.”

Mural paintings discovered at Qusayr Amrah, an 8th century desert castle about 60 miles east of Amman, Jordan, caused scholars to reassess the Islamic iconoclastic tradition. The residence, now on the UNESCO World Heritage List, was commissioned by Caliph Walid Ibn Yazid and features murals that depict hunting and dancing scenes, women in leisurely poses and craftsmen at work. The most famous mural shows the Umayyad ruler with the Byzantine emperor, the Sassanian King, the emperor of China, the Visigothic king of Spain, and the king of Abyssinia. This famous painting has had significant implications for understanding of aniconism in early Islam. One scholar, Dr. Nadia Ali of the University of Aix-en-Provence in France, argues that “it was primarily the belief in an invisible God that inhibited the production of images rather than the opposition to images as such.”

As a result, the principle of aniconism has undergone modifications. First, pictures came to be tolerated if they were confined “to private apartments and harems of palaces,” using the example of Qusayr Amrah. Persians and modern-era Iranians have produced an abundance of pictorial representations of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) and his family as well. In pictorial representation, animal and human figures are combined with other ornamental designs such as arabesques, thereby stressing their ornamental nature rather than representative function. Yet in other regions of the Muslim world—in North Africa, Egypt, and India, (except for Mughal palaces)—representational art was simply strictly forbidden.

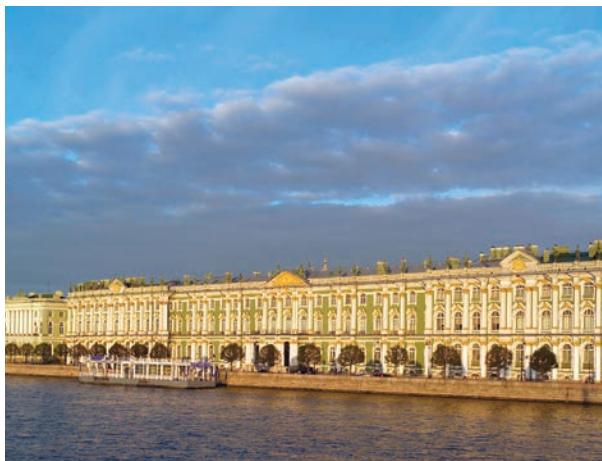


A portal at the St. Petersburg Mosque, known for its sky-blue mosaic tiles which cover the dome, minarets and other spaces of the mosque.



THE GREAT COLLECTIONS

Editorial Staff of the Journal of the Muslim World League | January 2020



The State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia.

THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM, SAINT PETERSBURG.

The State Hermitage Museum is the world’s second largest museum after the Louvre. Its collection contains in excess of three million items, spread over six historic buildings. Prof. Dr. Mikhail Piotrovskiy, a prominent Arabist and archaeologist, has been the General Director of the Hermitage since 1992. He is the author of more than 250 publications, including catalogues of Arabic manuscripts, medieval monuments and ancient inscriptions as well as works on Islamic political history and Arabic culture and archaeology. For many years, the museum has taken pride in its status as a symbol of Russia’s place in both East and West magnificence. “Russia is a Russian Orthodox country. It is an Islamic country, Islam is part of our history, and the Islamic population is part of our population. “My profession is an Arabist,” Piotrovsky says. “Being director of the Hermitage [State Museum] is a hobby.”



The Louvre at night, Paris.

MUSÉE DU LOUVRE, PARIS

Together with the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Louvre Museum is home to the largest collection of Islamic works of art in the world. Twenty years on from the Louvre’s great pyramid project, the creation of a new Department of Islamic Art within the Musée du Louvre represents a milestone in the history of the museum and former palace. A self-described “architectural, cultural, artistic, and civilizational offering,” the new department invites visitors on a “veritable sensory voyage”

of discovery into its Islamic collection. The Department of Islamic Arts was founded in 2003. At the end of the 19th century, the museum, founded in 1893, already had a section dedicated to “Muslim arts.” Now the museum exhibits nearly 3,000 works categorized as “Islamic art,” whose origins range from Spain to India and date from the 8th to the 19th century, while total holdings amount to 18,000 works from the Louvre’s collections.



The radiant face of a civilization that encompassed an infinitely varied wealth of humanity.

— The Louvre, Paris, describing Islamic art, on the occasion of the 2012 expansion of the museum’s Islamic art galleries.



The entrance of the British Museum in London.

THE BRITISH MUSEUM

The British Museum’s collection of objects from the Islamic world covers a broad and diverse spectrum of material culture stretching from West Africa to Southeast Asia. Made up of more than 100,000 objects from the 7th century to the present day, the collection has grown over two-and-a-half centuries through generous donations by individual collectors, curators and organizations, archaeological excavations, anthropological field research, and acquisitions.

The first objects in the collection were the result of a bequest of Sir Hans Sloane (1660–1753), a physician who amassed material from every culture. His entire collection amounted to around 71,000 objects, which he acquired to understand and tell the story of humankind. The Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic world represents an exciting new vision, displayed across two magnificent refurbished galleries at the heart of the British Museum.



The Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

THE LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART (LACMA)

The Islamic collection at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art is divided chronologically into four parts. This system of classification is intended to emphasize the overall unity of Islamic art within each of the four chronological periods, while also taking into account the numerous dynasties whose successive reigns punctuate Islamic history and whose patronage had an important impact on the development of Islamic art. The early Islamic period, the seventh through tenth century, covers the origins of Islam, the creation of a religious, political, and cultural commonwealth and the formation of a new style of art. In the early medieval period, from the eleventh through the mid-thirteenth century, and the late medieval period, the mid-thirteenth through the fifteenth century, various regional powers emerged, which promoted diverse forms of cultural expression. Finally, the late Islamic period, the sixteenth through the eighteenth century, was an age of great empires, in which powerful dynastic patronage, more than ever before, helped to promote and shape artistic styles.



The David Collection in Copenhagen, Denmark.

THE DAVID COLLECTION, COPENHAGEN

The Islamic Art Collection of prominent Danish lawyer Christian Ludwig David (1878-1960) grew into one of the ten most important in the Western world and counts as the largest of its kind in Scandinavia. Begun as a small selection of medieval ceramics from the Mideast and a few textiles, it today covers virtually the entire classical Islamic world, from Spain to India, and spans the period of the 7th to 19th century, with all artistic media represented. In addition, it is beautifully organized according to three categories: chronologically and geographically, according to material, and within a specific cultural context. In addition, this impressive private collection is housed in a gem of Copenhagen's 19th century residential architecture.

THE PERGAMON, BERLIN

The Pergamon Museum, one of Germany's most visited, houses monumental structures such as the Pergamon Altar, a monumental construction built during the reign of king Eumenes II in the first half of the 2nd century BC on one of the terraces of the acropolis of the ancient Greek city of Pergamon in Asia Minor; the Ishtar Gate of Babylon, the "eighth gate to the city of Babylon," constructed in 579 BC; and the Market Gate of Miletus, a massive marble monument constructed in the 2nd century AD and reconstructed from the ruins found in Anatolia. It is also home to the Mshatta Facade, the decorated part of the facade of the 8th-century Umayyad residential palace of Qasr Mshatta, one of the Desert Castles of Jordan.



The Mshatta Facade at the Pergamon Museum, Berlin.

The museum is subdivided into the antiquity collection, the Middle East museum and the museum of Islamic art. The pièce de résistance in the collection is the ornately decorated façade from the palace of Mshatta, which the Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid II presented to the museum as a gift.



Entrance to the Freer Gallery, part of the Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art known as the Freer-Sackler.

THE FREER-SACKLER, WASHINGTON DC

The Freer and Sackler together hold one of the country's finest collections of the arts of the Islamic world, with particular strengths in illustrated manuscripts and ceramics among the

more than 2,200 objects. The collection, while not among the largest in the world, is known for its unusual exhibitions that bring together those two traditional formats within multimedia dimensions. For example, in one 2018 exhibition, *Engaging the Senses*, the backdrop of Islamic art was used to highlight how, according to classical and Arab philosophy, the five outer senses—sound, sight, taste, touch, and smell—are directly connected to the inner senses that define us as human beings: understanding, imagination, and memory. Exhibits such as these emphasize how artists, objects, and ideas moved across the Islamic world, carrying with them certain formal and sensory features. This elegant Washington treasure specializes in this kind of artistic language, through which Islamic civilization is not just represented in “objects” but as a full sensory experience.



The Metropolitan Museum of Art is the largest art museum in the U.S.



The greatest contribution made by the new [Hermitage exhibition on Islamic art] is its determination to link the Islamic world with the rest of the planet. So often, Islam is seen as a culture in isolation. It never was, of course, although there are forces at work today that would like to return to some mythical, untainted time in the distant past...

— The journal *Islamica*, in a review of *Beyond Palace Walls*, an Islamic art exhibition at the State Hermitage Museum.⁶

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

The Met’s spectacular collection of Islamic art ranges in date from the seventh to the twenty-first century. Counting more than 15,000 objects, the diversity of the cultural traditions of Islam are magnificently organized, carefully tracing works from as far west as Spain and Morocco to as far east as Central Asia and India. Made up of both the sacred and the secular, the collection “reveals the mutual influence of artistic practices such as calligraphy, and the exchange of motifs such as vegetal ornament (the arabesque) and geometric patterning in both” the sacred and secular realms. The collection traces its founding to 1874, when the museum acquired some seals and jewelry from Islamic countries. The collection was then augmented in 1891 through a bequest of famed silversmith and art collector Edward C. Moore. Since then, the collection has grown through gifts, bequests, and purchases, as well as through museum-sponsored excavations at Nishapur, Iran, in 1935–39 and in 1947. By 1963, the number of objects had increased to a point that it was necessary to divide the ancient Near Eastern and the Islamic portions of the collection, and the Department of Islamic Art was founded. In 2011, after an extensive renovation, the Museum opened fifteen new Galleries for the Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia.



Great Galleries: Sam Fogg, London

Over the last three decades, Sam Fogg has built a reputation as the world's leading dealer in the art of the European Middle Ages. By raising the profile and visibility of this great and expanding subject, the gallery is committed to continually challenging and re-defining the market for medieval art. Sam Fogg Ltd also has a department devoted to the art of the Islamic lands and Indian art and has organized exhibitions accompanied by catalogues and mono-

graphic surveys on Sub-Saharan Islam, pilgrimage, Kufic calligraphy, the Qur'an, later Islamic calligraphy, Persian painting and Indian manuscripts. This ornate, luxurious gallery, with its atmosphere as serene as those of the large, stately museums, has been a top dealer to the great art institutions of the world, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the British Museum.



Dr. Al-Issa views the collections at the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg.

Celebrating Islamic Art in Africa: A World of Hidden Treasures, Global Reach



Emperor Musa of Mali depicted holding a gold coin.

With its January 2019 debut as a highly successful exhibition, *Caravans of Gold*, hosted by the Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University, allowed the outstanding achievements of African art—specifically, Islamic-themed African art—to shed light on a little-known chapter of world art history. This exhibit was a sprawling showcase of the splendor and power of the lost kingdoms and commercial centers of Islamic Africa, using centuries-old artifacts from sites around the Sahara Desert and artwork from West and North Africa, Europe and the Middle East that revealed the reach of Saharan networks.

The works featured were the product of new archaeological studies and a resulting body of emerging knowledge that have greatly enhanced scholars' understanding of the importance of West Africa in the 8th to 16th centuries. By exploring the global impact of Saharan trade routes on a medieval economy fueled by gold, the exhibition upended historical misconceptions about the continent's ancient achievements and demonstrated Africa's influence

on medieval Europe, North Africa, the Middle East and beyond.

According to its curators, the exhibit was conceived "to shine a light on Africa's pivotal role in world history through the tangible materials that remain."



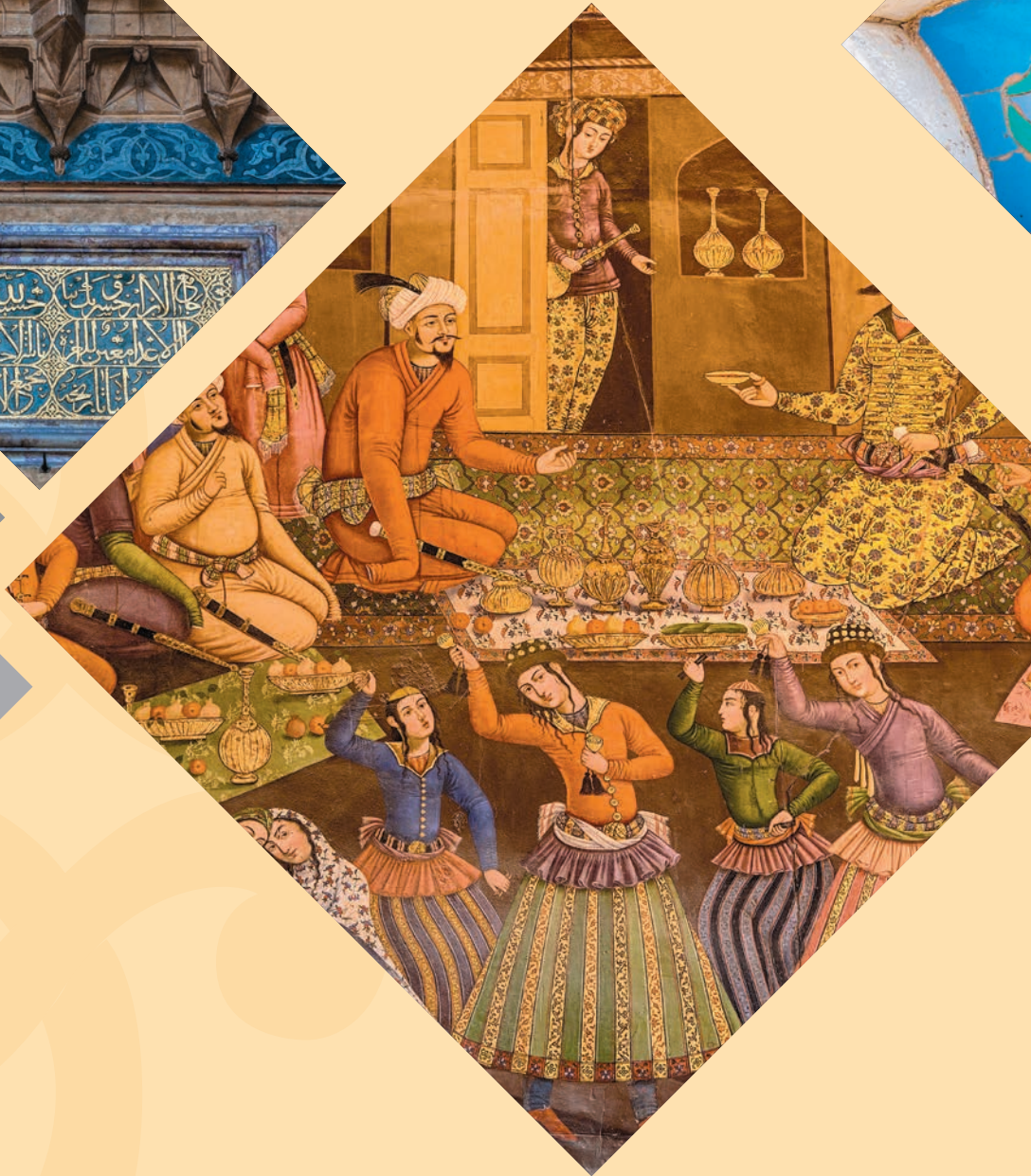
The richness of [these] collections has made us a very important resource for telling the story of Africa's significant contribution toward civilization

— Yusuf Usman, former director general of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments in Nigeria and a contributor to the "Caravans of Gold" publication.



*The culture that emanates from religions,
their symbolic treasures and their works of art,
must be better known and better shared.*

—Dr. Mohammad Al-Issa





Calligraphy is one of the most characteristic expressions of the Islamic spirit.

—Dr. Mohammad Al-Issa



FEATURE INTERVIEWS

Editorial Staff of the Journal of the Muslim World League | January 2020

The following interview-excerpts feature outstanding names in the field of the high arts—one, the curator of one of the world’s greatest museum collections of art, the second, a renowned New York-based dealer in masterpieces of art, another one of the foremost dealers in Islamic antiquities, and an esteemed writer-entrepreneur whose own works based on Mideast themes are featured at A-list institutions.



MR. ROBERT SIMON

Owner, The Robert Simon Gallery

Mr. Simon has long been a celebrated figure in the world art market for European Old Masters painting. His fame exceeded its own set record, however, with the discovery in the attic of an Italian gallery of the *Salvatore Mundi*, later officially designated a work of Leonardo da Vinci and sold to the Abu Dhabi Louvre by way of the Saudi royal family. Though not a specialist in Islamic art, Mr. Simon sees the Middle East as an outstanding region for the appreciation of European art, rejecting the “clash of civilization” notion that public audiences West and East represent different and therefore incommuni-

cable aesthetic values. Excerpted from an extensive interview, some of his comments on these values are particularly enlightening:

On the appreciation of European art in the Mideast

“The appreciation of Old Masters in the Mideast by a Middle Eastern public requires an understanding of that public. Just as it does where a European public or an American one is concerned. Each appreciation will be different. Obviously, these works reflect a very different world the one in which we live, and it can be challenging for anyone today fully to appreciate them. Most were created in a Christian culture, and it is possible, even healthy, to divorce the religious content from these paintings. Universal beliefs do not ‘require’ religion”

“The *Salvator Mundi* is a great example of this. Christ is historically Jewish, the focus of all Christian religions, and is revered in Islam. And, as with many Leonardos, this painting evokes aspects of both the male and the female, and the divine and the human. As a work of art, it not only a depiction of a specific historical figure, but an evocation of the spirituality and humanity that exists in all cultures. The subject matter, in this painting, as with most Old Master paintings, provides the framework for the expression of issues important for the artist. The specific mythological or religious title of the painting is less significant than the content — which may be educational, spiritual, intellectual, or emotional.”

On the universal experience of art:

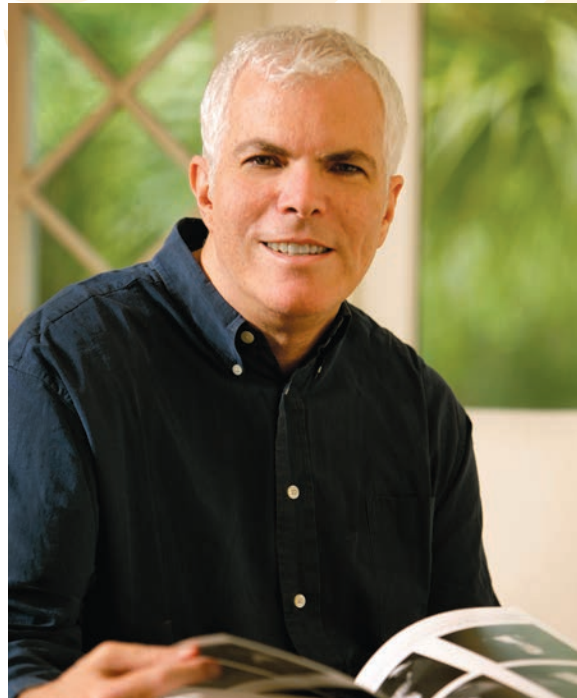
"One does not need scholarship to appreciate a work of art. Relax, and be open and do not let a different or unknown subject matter be a barrier. When I go to see African or Hindu art, for example, I relate to these works on a level that does not require a deep scholarly knowledge of them. They can be appreciated solely on the basis of their visual appeal, but this can encourage one to want to learn more about them. For me the proper experience of a work of art is at first the emotional engagement; knowing it intellectually comes after."

On a hypothetical 'dream' exhibition in the Mid-east region:

"My dream exhibition in the Middle East would be a survey of Italian painting, beginning with the Byzantine era and continuing through the 19th century. What would also be interesting is a broad survey of European painting: Flemish, Spanish, German."

On painting being appreciated in the Mideast:

"I'd like to see this as an expression of the power of art that transcends all cultures and religions."



STEVEN NAIFEH
Artist and Pulitzer Prize-winning Biographer

At a young age, the artist Steven Naifeh was caught in the crosswinds of cultural influences that would inspire in him an East-West aesthetic extraordinarily modern in its sense of intellectual abstraction, yet traditional in its homage to classical Islamic geometric patterns that have informed his artistic idiom and defined his world-renowned style.

Born to U.S. diplomats George Naifeh and Marion Naifeh in Tehran in the 1950s, his peripatetic childhood featured sojourns in Baghdad, Baida and Benghazi in Libya, Lagos, Karachi, Abu Dhabi, Muscat and Amman. He began painting at age ten in Libya, studying first with Dutch-born artist



Catharina Baart Stephan and, beginning at age fifteen, with Bruce Onobrakpeya, one of the leading Nigerian artists of the 20th century.

He is today famous on several accounts—firstly, that he is the Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer of both Jackson Pollock, one of the great names of 20th century painting, and of the illustrious Vincent van Gogh, of whose works Mr. Naifeh is a prominent collector. He is also a businessman who founded several companies, including Best Lawyers that spawned an industry of professional rankings, and Best Doctors, a company dedicated to helping others with undiagnosed or seemingly untreatable medical illnesses find the best medicine anywhere in the world. Although he sold the company in 2000, it continues to serve more than 30 million members worldwide.

Yet despite these outstanding literary and artistic successes, another calling came to predominate, that of his own Islamic-art inspired modern masterpiece sculpture. Mr. Naifeh returned to painting and sculpting in 1998, creating massive works of ornate abstraction based on geometric formulas from medieval art from southern Spain to northern India but closely related to the works of such 20th century western masters as Frank Stella and Sol Lewitt. He had an exhibition at the Columbia Museum of Art in the summer of 2013 and the journal Humanities Magazine noted that Naifeh's "tessellating works explore the threads weaving together traditional Islamic art and the Geometric Abstraction movement." The Free Times wrote that the exhibition offered "many rich ideas for exploration: formal beauty, the nature of abstraction, how art and math intersect, and insights into the cultural expressions of" the Middle East.



Muslims are often in the news for all the wrong reasons so one of our motivations was to show a different side to Islam. We want to emphasise some of the beauty and diversity in Islam.

—Organizers of the exhibit, "Multicultural Expressions of Islamic Art,"
Christchurch, New Zealand, April 3, 2017.



FAYEZ BARAKAT

Owner, the Barakat Gallery, Los Angeles, London & Seoul

After a lifetime amassing a collection estimated to number some 50,000 pieces and valued at \$2 billion, Mr. FAYEZ BARAKAT of London and Beverly Hills was among the first of the big-name Islamic art and antiquities dealers from origins that were hardly the part of any “art scene” at the time. Born in Jerusalem into a farming family, Mr. Barakat was exposed to ancient art at a very young age when the family owned vineyards in the Hebron Hills in Palestine and locals working the fields would often unearth tombs.

“At that time, people were not as sophisticated or cultured as they are today to appreciate the historical or the archeological side of what was discovered,” Mr. Barakat says.

However, his great-grandfather saw things differently and spotted an opportunity. He took the artifacts to the marketplace, along with the family’s produce, and sold them to tourists who were more than happy to pay. Mr. Barakat, meanwhile,

spent his formative years working alongside British archeologist Kathleen Kenyon, developing skills in the basic principles of field archeology, and he would later apply his passion to studying under renowned Middle Eastern scholars and archaeologists Nelson Glueck and William Dever. His interest, in particular, was in ancient coinage, though he would become a fervent student of whatever new period of art took his interest. “For me to be able to connect to Emperor Constantine at the age of seven, after being told (a coin I found) was about 1,700 years old, simply blew my mind,” he says of finding his first coin, by accident, on the way to school. “I became such an avid lover of history at an early age.”

After turning down a Fulbright Scholarship to study medicine at age 14 after his father believed the distance apart would be too difficult, he joined the family business — building it up to five galleries across Jerusalem and Bethlehem. His early collections were classical, biblical, Egyptian and — later — Mesoamerican, or pre-Columbian, art. The latter, in what emerges as a theme in his life story, was influenced by a meeting with the late American film director, screenwriter and actor John Huston, who would come to be a good friend and ultimately influence his decision to set up his first overseas gallery in Beverly Hills in 1983. Mr. Barakat had already opened in Amman, Jordan, in 1973, and galleries in London (2003) and at the Emirates Palace (2008) would come much later. Most recently, a branch has opened in South Korea, as a strategic crossroads for the art-savvy Asian market.

Among his current roles, Mr. Barakat is playing an unofficial advisory role in Louvre Abu Dhabi — one of three cultural institutions slated for the Saadiyat Cultural District, along with the Zayed National Museum and Guggenheim Abu Dhabi. A passionate painter, his acclaimed works have appeared in gallery showings around the world.



DR. SHEILA R. CANBY

*Curator Emerita of the Department of Islamic Art
The Metropolitan Museum of Art*

Dr. Sheila R. Canby was appointed to head up the Department of Islamic Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City in 2009 until 2018, when, upon retirement, she became Curator Emerita of that collection.

Her post at the Met followed a brilliant decade-long career at the British Museum as curator of Islamic art and antiquities. But it was at the Met where her life-long love and devotion to the arts of the Islamic world took full flight with the magnificent expansion of that Department into 13 new galleries, collectively titled “The New Galleries for the Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and Later South Asia.” Here below are excerpts from a fascinating interview where she describes the meaning of Islamic art, its symbolism and what art communicates between civilizations:

On the unifying aesthetic force of Islam

“There are motifs that you find across a very wide geographic spread, and that wouldn’t have hap-

pened if those regions hadn’t been unified by a single religion, being Islam.

On the importance of calligraphy, of writing:

“The use of the Arabic script, of course, spread, as the religion spread. They reverse it, they do mirror writing, tiny writing, huge writing. The written word in Islam is of absolute paramount importance. And the act of copying a Quran is an act of devotion, religious devotion.”

On the duty of a museum collection

“[The Met’s] newest gallery is [the] Moroccan court, which was built over a six-month period by a group of craftsmen from Fez. What it is, is an adaptation of the type of courtyard that one finds in several madrassas—religious schools or seminaries—in Fez. But, you know, our court is just tiny by comparison to those, so the challenge really was that we had to design it in such a way that they could kind of shrink but keep the proportions right. The tile panels are actually inspired by a tile panel in Alhambra.”



*Evil cannot expand except
in the absence of Good.
Injustice can only prevail
in the absence of Justice.
Backwardness can be
defeated if countered by
Knowledge.*

—Dr. Mohammad Al-Issa

On the communication of cultural knowledge through the medium of art

“One of the stories we wanted to tell, really, was about the complexity of society in Spain while it was still under Muslim control, and so we have actually two Hebrew manuscripts. The Hebrew Bible is fascinating because it has a page with what looks like geometric designs. But then if you look closely you realize that all these geometric designs are made from micro-writing, and in the same case [the museum] has pages from a Quran that was written in micro-writing. So not only were the geometric designs being shared and used by people of different faiths, but also the whole idea of this tiny writing seems to have appealed to both Muslims and to Jews in Spain.”

On the meaning of art in unifying mankind:

“What I would hope is that people would understand that although the religion infuses all of these lands and these historical periods that regions were individual, and regions had particular styles. And also the commonality with mankind, which is that we all have—we all eat and have bowls to eat from, we all, you know—there are so many things that are common to all of us, and to think of things in that way, I think, humanizes the religion and humanizes the objects to people who are not familiar with it.”



A page from the blue Qu'ran from North Africa or Spain, 9th or 10th century.

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