

# Rediscovered riches

The British Museum's new Albukhary Foundation Gallery gives visitors the opportunity both to look afresh at the museum's astonishing Islamic collection and to gain a better understanding of the cultures behind it, says Andrew Graham-Dixon

The British Museum is a treasure trove of Islamic art and artefacts. Its collections of Moghul, Mamluk and Safavid metalwork are unparalleled; and its many early manuscript pages from the Qur'an include some of the most wrenchingly vivid sheets of calligraphy to have survived the centuries that first witnessed the rise of a powerful new faith preached by the followers of a man called Prophet Mohammed. One of these pages in particular has fascinated me ever since I first saw it some 30 or 40 years ago, even though I lack the language to read it. Inscribed in Kufic by a Syrian scribe in the ninth or 10th century, it vibrates with spiritual conviction: the characters are ranked in a phalanx of forms, each holy word resembling (to my eye at least) an ink-black chariot of war on a parchment field of battle.

The museum also houses a number of astonishingly intricate examples of Iznik ceramic ware, including a mosque lamp from the mid-16th-century refurbishment of the Dome of the Rock, bequeathed by former trustee Charles Drury Edward Fortnum (1820-99). That object is itself a fine complement to the matchless group of some 600 pieces of Islamic pottery that once formed part of the collection of Frederick Du Cane Godman (1834-1919), a connoisseur and ornithologist persuaded onto the board of the British Museum by the tireless Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks (1826-97). Franks was one of the first Keepers to press for the acquisition of Islamic objects - so much so that he has sometimes been dubbed the 'second founder' of the museum. As Franks would have hoped, Godman's collection of ceramics was eventually donated to the British Museum - although surprisingly recently, in 1983, by his daughter, Edith. Each object within it offers a different delight, often the delight of an imagined pastoral heaven, compressing all the flowers and colours of paradise into the dimensions of a mere bowl or tile. Is it

a coincidence, I wonder, that such an entrancing taste for verdancy and fertility, for the arabesques of tendril and vine and for the rainbow colours of the tulip and the rose, should have been born in countries so regularly parched by the sun?

There is a multitude of other things to marvel at in the collection: a compass of exquisite subtlety, painted on ivory in Cairo in the early 1580s; an astrolabe of brass inlaid with silver and copper and decorated with fantastic, sinuous figures of beasts and men, created perhaps in northern Iraq in the first half of the 13th century; a horse bridle from Arab Spain, made from gilded enamel on leather, which has somehow survived horses, riders and the depredations of time for nearly six centuries; rare shards of gilded glassware, revealing the miraculously unbroken form of an eagle with wings outspread, from mid-12th-century Syria. The more you explore it, the more the British Museum's Islamic Department comes to resemble that magic purse of legend that never ran out of gold coins, no matter how many were extracted from it.

Yet for all the richness of its holdings, many of the British Museum's visitors have long remained unaware that they are entering an Aladdin's Cave of Islamic art. Until recently, the displays devoted to this vast theme were both rather cramped and rather out of the way (the quickest way to reach them was to come in by the back entrance, and turn immediately left, into a dispiritingly low-ceilinged gallery space). But all that is about to change. In October, the museum will unveil a major new display of its Islamic collection, in a suite of tall rooms on the first floor of the building that have been redesigned for the purpose by the architectural practice Stanton Williams. The spaces are elegant and monumental in feel, giving an Islamic twist to the original, classically inspired architecture of Robert Smirke through the addition of a number »



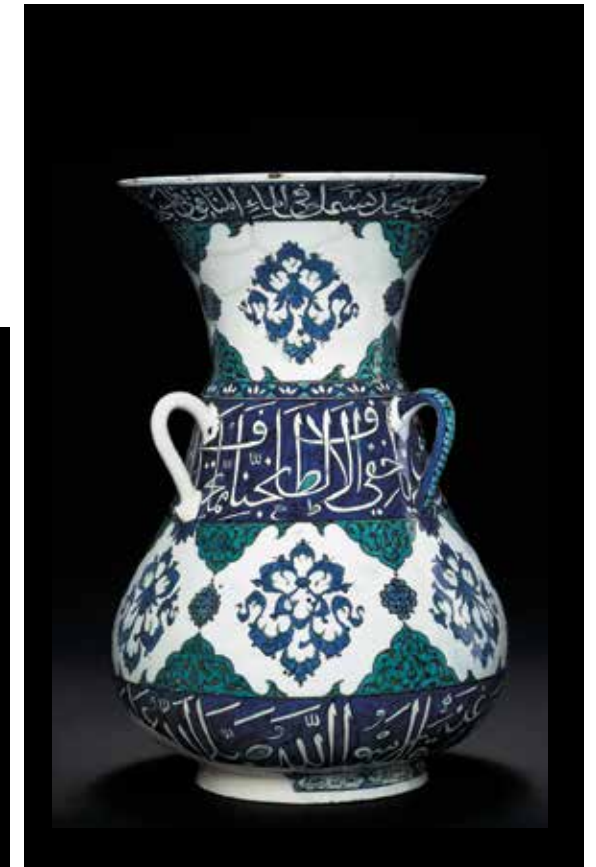
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1. Figure of a camel's head, 749-1258AD

2. Glazed Iznik pottery mosque lamp, 1549

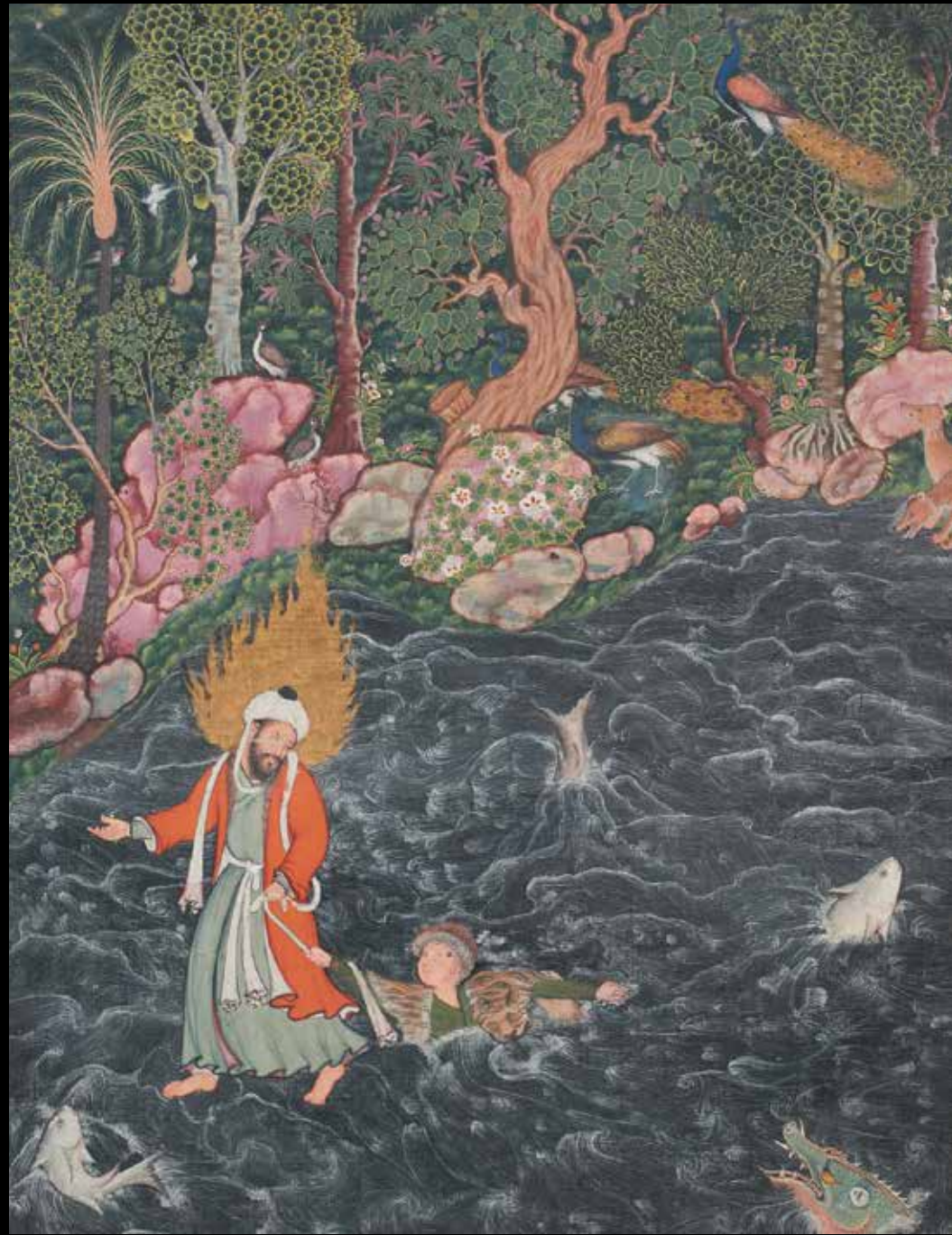
3. Face painted on stucco, ninth century

4. Brass, silver and copper astrolabe, 1240-41



Photos: © The Trustees of the British Museum





5.  
Page from *The Hamzanama*,  
circa 1558–73

Photo: © The Trustees of the British Museum

of modern screens of intricate geometric design, inspired by ancient Islamic examples. They are also considerably larger than the galleries that previously housed the collection. As a result, there will be much more room for the permanent display of art from the Islamic world (an additional 200 square metres of floor space). There will be more flexibility, too. New technology allowing curators far greater control over light levels means that many more light-sensitive works – such as, for example, the incomparable Mughul manuscript depicting the adventures of Hamza, the so-called *Hamzanama* – will be on view than before. Given the exceptional wealth of the museum’s holdings in textiles and works on paper, including contemporary art from the cultures of modern Islam, this is a very welcome development.

The entire project has been funded by the Albukhary Foundation, a non-profit philanthropic organisation based in Malaysia, which is reflected in the name of the new suite of rooms: the Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic World. It might be said that the British Museum is reaping what was sown more than a decade ago, in 2005, when former director Neil MacGregor loaned a group of exquisite Iznik objects, without charge, to the fledgling Islamic Museum of Malaysia – another Albukhary Foundation initiative. That act of generosity has now been repaid with interest.

**E**arlier this year, I met a number of the people who have been most intimately involved with the project, including the current director of the British Museum, Hartwig Fischer. Keenly aware of the need to rethink many of the museum’s existing displays, he regards the new display of Islamic art both as a bold experiment and as a first step in a new direction: ‘It is a fantastic opportunity to test some ideas and to come up with a model that will help us sharpen our thinking for the rest of the museum. After all, we are looking at a vast expanse, both geographically and historically, spanning the world from Nigeria to Indonesia, and spanning time from the seventh century to the present day: so what you see is an immensely rich variety of objects, and it is our challenge to show the interconnectedness of these many cultures that all pertain to Islam.’ Syed Mohamad Albukhary, Director of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, is hopeful that the new display will enhance many people’s understanding of ‘the breadth and depth of the world of Islam – which is anything but one culture, one thing, one place, one time. Indonesia is home to 200 million Muslims, Pakistan to 180 million. There are Muslims in India, there are Muslims in China. Islam is not just about the Middle East. Many people, especially in the West, do not realise this.’

The new display will certainly make it difficult for anyone visiting the British Museum to cling to any single narrow or stereotypical view of what is encompassed by the ‘world of Islam’ – or should that be ‘worlds’? According to curator Venetia Porter,

‘We are very consciously setting out to tell a much broader story in terms of both time and place than we have ever told before.’ The display will be divided into two, with one section devoted to the period from the seventh century to the 15th century and a second taking up the story from then to the present day. Each space will be occupied by a central spine of display cases in which the viewer will encounter the major court cultures of Islam – those of the Abbasids, the Safavids, the Moghuls, and so on – through their masterpieces in various mediums. This will allow the museum to play to the strengths of its collection, established as it was during a time of both British imperial might and burgeoning connoisseurship. As Porter puts it, ‘We have many, many things so rare and precious that collectors now would give their eye teeth for them – and we feel a responsibility to make sure that people from all over the world can come here and see them.’

But, she adds, that is not the whole story, by any means. There will also be multiple ancillary displays running around the edges of the galleries that seek to illuminate less well-known aspects of the story of Islamic cultures. For example, the great Abbasid caliphal city of Samarra will be represented by a trove of fascinating archaeological material excavated during the early 20th century: fragments of wall painting showing human figures and animals, including a famous pair of so-called ‘kissing camels’, which vividly give the lie to the belief that Islam is inimical to figurative art. But the display will also find room for objects excavated from a much humbler coastal Abbasid town of the same period: simple bangles, for instance, or the stamps used to imprint administrative documents, or fragments of ceramic from far-flung places, which reveal the extent of the Abbasid trade network.

As Porter’s co-curator, Ladan Akbarnia, remarks, ‘The collection is very rich in objects that reveal the life of ordinary Muslims at many times and in many places, but such material has not always made it out of the storerooms on to display.’ Numerous other displays will take the curious visitor away from the familiar high ground of Islamic art – the jewel-like miniatures of the Mughul painters, the masterworks of Iznik potters, the paradise carpets of Persia – into less familiar corners. There will, for example, be a display devoted to the traditions of folk embroidery that flourished in 19th-century Pakistan.

Breadth and depth indeed: in one sense, it strikes me that the project of redisplaying its Islamic collection brings the museum face to face with the absurdity of its own categorisations. The idea that the ‘world of Islam’ might be encompassed by any single collection of objects, an inheritance of the 19th-century museology pioneered by Augustus Wollaston Franks and his contemporaries, is plainly a fantasy. After all, the modern faith of Islam counts just under a quarter of the population of the world among its adherents. Historically, there have been more than enough Islamic cultures and societies to fill even an institution as large as the British Museum a thousand times over with objects and artefacts. The ‘world of Islam’, in other words, is and always »



## The Islamic Department resembles that magic purse of legend that never ran out of gold coins

has been far too complex and multifarious to constrain or contain. You might as well have a museum department devoted to ‘the world’.

But in the case of Islam, it also strikes me that to promote some glimmering understanding of its unchartable vastness, its diversity and unencompassability is in itself, especially at present, extremely important. Many non-Muslim people today have a knee-jerk reaction to the very word Islam: it means trouble, it means the Middle East, it means Palestinian versus Jew, it means Isis or Isil or whatever you want to call it, suicide bombers and closed minds and the oppression of women.

People are apt to forget that many, if not most Islamic civilisations have coexisted peacefully – or at least as peacefully as any human civilisations – with their neighbours. People are apt to forget that in Arab Spain, for several centuries, Muslim conquerors lived peacefully with and in tolerance of the large communities of Jews and Christians who were their subjects. People are apt to forget that the West, with its Renaissance and its classically inspired values of democracy and rational philosophy, owes a great deal of its own tradition to the enlightened Arab (Muslim) scholars who preserved so much of the canon of ancient Greek literature that has been passed down to us. People are apt to forget that Muslims lived side by side with the Mongols who ruled China, and that Muslims in what is now Turkey once traded and exchanged ideas with the Chinese during the Ming and later Ching dynasties. People are apt to forget that the earliest Muslims regarded Christian cultures not merely as rivals to their own, but as sources of inspiration, borrowing much that would become central to their own decorative and intellectual traditions, for example, from the Byzantine world. People are apt to forget that the toxically intolerant mutation of the Islamic faith that has caused such chaos and misery in the world of today is a very recent and unusual phenomenon: a small and twisted twig at the very end of just one branch of a truly vast tree.

Even if it represents just a fraction of the ‘world of Islam’, a great museum can remind all of us, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, of these important truths: by including, for example, as the British Museum display will do, the art and artefacts created by Jews or by Coptic Christians who once lived among Muslims in societies ruled by believers in the Islamic faith; by revealing the correspondences and influences running between, say, Iznik pottery

and Chinese porcelain; by suggesting some of the ways in which astronomers, mathematicians and all kinds of other thinkers from the Islamic world have furthered human knowledge. In the words of Hartwig Fischer, the new display of Islamic art at the British Museum will represent ‘not a dialogue, but a polylogue’, and as such, he describes it both as a blueprint for the future shape of the museum and as a space with a powerful message for the present: ‘It is important to understand that what drives the development of humankind into incredible diversity is exchange, not closing up and putting up walls. It is being curious about others, holding your ground while listening. This a good time to be reminded of that.’

Syed Mohamad Albukhary echoes the sentiment, bemoaning the fact that ‘we live in a world of increasing intolerance and persistent ignorance’, and adding that one of the reasons why his foundation was happy to foot the bill for the British Museum’s new Islamic displays was in fact the libertarian nature of British society itself: ‘Seen from the global perspective, Britain is a very tolerant country, a truly multicultural society, with people of many religions living peacefully side by side.’ To which Fischer adds, ‘Such a society doesn’t happen by itself. It’s an effort. We have come a long way to reach that point, and we should be aware of how precious and important this is to all of us. It is something that needs to be maintained, to be lived out, every day, actively.’

Perhaps to make his point, Fischer singles out one particular item from the many thousands of objects in the British Museum’s Islamic collections. ‘It is a very simple thing, made in Somalia in the early 20th century, but one that has always intrigued me: a little board of wood that you use when you learn to write. You write on it with ink, and then you wash it so that you can use it again. It still bears traces of words that have been wiped off. It incorporates the holy scripture of the Qur’an – and I say “incorporates” in a very direct sense: the idea is that when you wash it you actually drink the inky water, because the ink has written holy words. It speaks of the word, of holy text, of revelation, of an incredible attention to the word: the word being the realm of thinking.’

A thoughtful if unlikely choice of desert-island object from the world of Islam. I wonder if it might not be a fitting allegory for the role of the British Museum itself, in the world in which we live. Endlessly recomposed, a space sacred to thought, knowledge and education: the most powerful weapons we have against the ignorance that leads to prejudice, hatred and their dark consequences. ♦



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6. Page from the Qur’an, ninth–10th century

7. Iznik basin, circa 1545–50

8. Qur’an board acquired from Somalia in 1935

9. Uzbek woman’s ikat coat, 1870s–1920s

Photos: © The Trustees of the British Museum