

**RIGHT & BELOW** These two objects are shown side by side in the new gallery. The main image is a bronze ewer, from 9th-century AD Iraq or Iran, but its shape is derived from Classical antiquity. Its medallion features a mythical creature known as a *senmurv*, which was popular in Sasanian art. An example of the same creature dating to the 7th or 8th century AD from the façade or interior of a villa in northern Iraq shows how Islamic art drew on this earlier aesthetic.



**ABOVE** A dish depicting Mary holding Christ. It was created in the Islamic artistic tradition, but was probably intended for use in a Christian context. **ABOVE RIGHT** This 19th-century gold disc (31mm high, 100mm diameter, scale to the dish) carries a description of the Prophet Muhammad with tiny holes so that it could be worn for protection.

# Rethinking the Islamic world

## A FRESH APPROACH TO A CELEBRATED COLLECTION

On 18 October 2018, the new Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic World will open its doors to visitors at the British Museum. CWA was invited to take a look behind the scenes as installation of the objects was under way.

**H**ow do you tackle a subject as enormous as the Islamic world? The advent of the new religion occurred in 7th-century Arabia, but as its popularity spread, so too the Islamic world expanded, pulling off spectacular victories over Sasanian and Byzantine armies. In time, the followers of Islam controlled a larger landmass than the Roman Empire, bringing them into contact with communities living in territories as distant as China, Africa, and Europe. The previous incarnation of the gallery at the British Museum – set up in the 1980s – focused on Islamic art, but now a team of curators has been assembled to take a very different approach to presenting life in the Islamic world.

‘The previous gallery was how you learnt about Islamic art at a university,’ said Fahmida Suleman, one of the gallery curators. ‘It was very dynastic and date-led, so every case was connected to a major dynasty of that period.’



It was great for people who were teaching Islamic art, because they could just lead their students through the gallery, but it was not very accessible for the majority of general visitors. So we thought to ourselves, if we had to start from scratch, what would we do? The old gallery focused on material from the Middle East department, whereas this time we’ve thrown

**LEFT** A complete Indian cooking pot from Siraf and dating to c.7th-9th century. It may have belonged to emigrants from South Asia involved in Indian Ocean trade.

open the doors and are looking at the Islamic world from West Africa to South-east Asia. Curators are adding things to the gallery until tomorrow, as we add things to the gallery.’

Teasing out the cultural influences that have shaped and adapted as its world grew is aided by the new location in the museum. ‘The old gallery was tucked away near the north entrance’, says Ladan Akbarnia, ‘but when we had this new opportunity – thanks to the Albukhary Foundation – it made sense to put the Islamic rooms at the heart of the museum. What better way to introduce this culture to the world? Before it was closer to the Asia galleries, but now it’s nearer to the collections addressing Byzantium, the Vikings, and Islamic Spain. We’ll still reference Asia, but you can’t be close to everything. The ideal museum would probably have to have connections to every other room and be circular!’

Visitors entering the first room of the new gallery will arrive after passing the spectacular objects representing Europe from AD 300 to 1000. The general theme of connections is immediately seized by a case displaying objects excavated from the port city of Siraf, near the Persian Gulf in Iran. ‘Siraf was excavated in the 1970s by the British Museum,’ says Ladan. ‘What we’ve done is show elements of the city. It was not just a port that people travelled through to other places. You have to imagine people arriving from all over the world, be it India, what is now Iraq, or other places connected by the Indian Ocean. Here, it was

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ALL IMAGES: The Trustees of the British Museum



# Islamic world

## COLLECTION

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**ABOVE** A dish depicting Mary holding Christ. It was created in 17th-century Turkey in the Islamic artistic tradition, but was probably intended for a Christian patron.  
**ABOVE RIGHT** This 19th-century gold disc (31mm high and shown at a different scale to the dish) carries a description of the Prophet Muhammad, and was pierced with tiny holes so that it could be worn for protection on clothing.

open the doors and are looking at the Islamic world all of the way from West Africa to South-east Asia. Our timeframe runs from the 7th century until tomorrow, as we will continually add things to the gallery.'

Teasing out the cultural influences that Islam adopted and adapted as its world grew is aided by the new gallery's location in the museum. 'The old gallery was in a niche tucked away near the north entrance', says curator Ladan Akbarnia, 'but when we had this wonderful opportunity - thanks to the Albukhary Foundation - it made sense to put the Islamic rooms at the heart of the museum. What better way to introduce this culture to the world? Before it was closer to the Asia galleries, but now it's nearer to the collections addressing Byzantium, the Vikings, and Islamic Spain. We'll still reference Asia, but you can't be close to everything. The ideal museum would probably have to have connections to every other room and be circular!'

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**RIGHT** This Sudanese throwing axe is covered in what appears to be script, but much of it is just a pattern that looks like writing.



CULTURAL  
 MUSEUM

that you mingled with people from many different cultures. We have a complete ceramic pot from India in the case. Perhaps it was used by an Indian family, or perhaps it was acquired by another resident of Siraf - regardless, it shows the existence of these global networks.'

### Art for all

A reminder of the different communities existing within the Islamic world can also be found in the range of products being created by its craftsmen. 'One thing that takes many members of the general public by surprise is that Islam is an Abrahamic religion,' notes curator Zeina Klink-Hoppe. 'For example, we have a dish showing Mary holding the Christ child. It was produced in Turkey in the 17th century, probably for a Christian patron, but within the artistic tradition of the Islamic world. Mary also has a whole chapter or sura of the Qur'an dedicated to her, and is indeed the only woman mentioned by name within it. The virgin birth is recognised, and she is revered for her chastity and piety. We also tell the story of the Prophet Muhammad, and have a gold amulet that bears a verbal description of him. The text talks about his dark hair, bluish-black eyes, his round face, his handsome beard, and so on. The gold disk has all of these little holes around its edges so that it could be sewn onto clothes and used to protect the wearer.'

The power of writing also made itself felt in other ways. 'Arabic was an oral tradition until the beginning of Islam,' explains curator Venetia Porter. 'When they did occasionally feel the need to write, they turned to the Aramaic script used by the Nabataeans of Petra. When Islam emerged, literacy took off because people needed to write down the Qur'an, the words of God. The script they used was Arabic, which hadn't been used in that way before. So you have this proliferation of writing, but it is not only used for communication, it is also used for decoration. That's partly due to the issues with representing figures, but it's also because the Arabic script is so beautiful it lends itself to being employed in this way. When you look at how writing appears on objects, one ▶





**LEFT & ABOVE** Two examples of wood carving from 14th- or 15th-century Egypt. On the left is a depiction of 'The Entry into Jerusalem' from a Coptic church, while above is a panel from a mosque mihrab. Both pieces display a similar artistic style.

interesting example is a throwing axe from Sudan. It is covered in text, including the word 'Allah' (God), but much of the script is indecipherable. Not because we can't read it today – no one could ever read it – it is not legible in that sense and is really just a pattern that looks like writing. But it still had a power for those who saw it.'

### Cultural melting pot

If the line between text and decoration could become blurred, so too did those between Islamic artistic styles and those of the cultures they assimilated. 'The problem with referring to an Islamic art is that it implies a monolith', notes Venetia, 'and it absolutely isn't. Wherever the religion moved, the arts combined with other traditions that were already present in a region to create something new. That's why you get this incredible diversity. When Islamic armies moved into Sasanian and Byzantine territories they seized all of this booty, but they didn't destroy it. They kept it and revered it, because it showed they had conquered these great civilisations. I wanted to show how early Islamic art was an amazing melting pot, where ideas from earlier cultures came together, so we've put objects side by side so that

people can compare them. One example is the use of the *senmurv*, which is a mythical bird very popular in Sasanian art. You can see this creature incorporated into 8th-century Islamic art. You also had Sasanian booty circulating at Islamic courts, and there's wonderful poetry about how these Sasanian bowls were filled with wine and you could see Persian figures inside them. We have a Sasanian bowl with a beautiful peacock image inside, and the same kind of aesthetic is replicated on an Islamic pot.'

Perhaps the most striking example of how the new gallery allows you to compare and contrast pieces of art comes from a glorious combination of Egyptian wood panelling from a 14th-century Coptic church and a mosque mihrab or prayer niche. The quality of the carving – especially from the church – is spectacular, but what really leaps out is the way that both faiths are embracing the same artistry. Far from suggesting a polarised world where worshippers jealously guard the emblems of their faith, these objects elegantly illustrate how the same craftsmen would accept commissions from different clients, leading them to make both scenes from the life of Christ and mosque furniture. 'We're not making a point,' adds Venetia, 'we're just saying that this is Egypt in the 14th century. People can extrapolate into the present if they want to, and think about Coptic society nowadays.' In that regard, the new gallery offers a fine testimony to the way that different influences can combine to create something beautiful. ■

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

**THE ALBUKHARY FOUNDATION GALLERY OF THE ISLAMIC WORLD** will open at the British Museum on 18 October 2018. Entrance is free. CWA is grateful to the curatorial team and Olivia Rickman.

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