

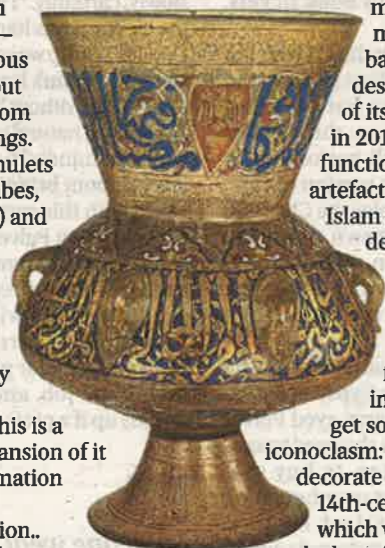
Treasures and everyday beauty in the Islamic world

EXHIBITION
The Albukhary Foundation
Gallery of the Islamic World
 British Museum, WC1
 ★★★★★
Melanie McDonagh

VISITORS to the British Museum's new gallery of the Islamic World should take note: this is not a gallery dedicated to Islam, the religion, but a gallery of the Islamic world, that is to say a vast portion of the globe stretching from Africa to Indonesia. So, while the religion itself is given due consideration, the works here are infinitely various.

And, given the number of ethnicities and religions that this vast area includes, not to say the temporal span of the galleries – from the Arab world just before the birth of Mohammed in the sixth century to the art of Idris Khan in the 21st century – that gives tremendous scope for drawing out unseen treasures from the BM's vast holdings.

You get games, amulets and charms, astrolabes, costumes (fabulous) and shadow puppets as well as the tiles and calligraphy you would expect. Obviously the BM already had a gallery devoted to the Islamic world, but this is a reordering and expansion of it thanks to a large donation from the Malaysian Albukhary Foundation.. Neil MacGregor, the



previous head of the BM, who received the donation, was looking round when I was there, and he was justifiably proud of the whole thing. The donors, he said, hadn't sought to restrict the nature of the exhibits but they had asked that it should reflect the breadth of the Islamic world, not just the more obvious Arab, Persian and Ottoman elements. It does.

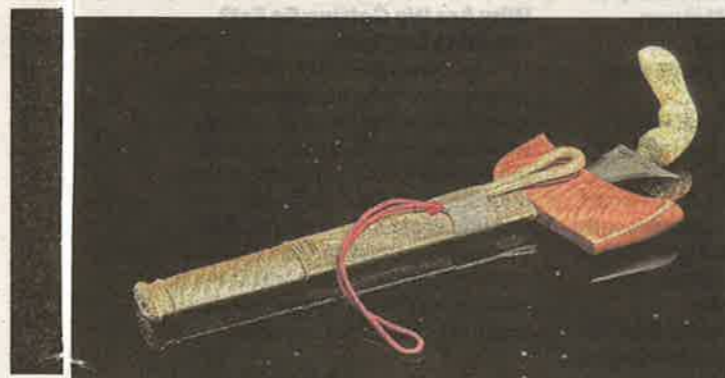
That enormous geographical reach means that the curators can put Islamic culture constantly in the context of the others with which it came into contact, through trade and conquest and the movement of artists: Sasanians, Byzantines, Romans.

In the first room, given over to the Islamic world before 1500, there's a moving display from pre-Islamic Palmyra, the legendary city of Zenobia, represented by a funerary monument of a dead youth with a bunch of grapes, c 150BC. The viewer must supply the melancholy backdrop: the destruction of so much of its archaeology by IS in 2015 – the BM has a function as an ark for artefacts. The question of Islam and figurative art is dealt with: the prohibition on figures in the context of worship plainly left scope for a variety of later interpretations. We get some interesting iconoclasm: birds used to decorate the Koran on a 14th-century ceramic which were decapitated by later fundamentalists.

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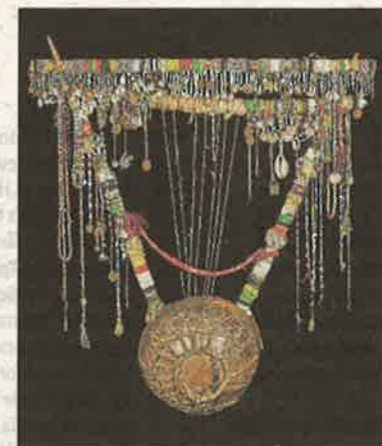
Stunning scope: main image, tiles from the Shi'a shrine Imamzada Ja-far. Right, a Sudanese lyre. Below right, a manuscript attributed to the Mughal court artist Miskin



The layout is sane: chronological, subdivided by geography. That means that there's a coherent whole, within which are fascinating digressions in the side cases into themes such as charms, games or musical instruments. The costume cases are a delight: like so much of these displays they will be changed at intervals. There are really fine pieces here:



splendid examples of the legendary metalwork of Herat and the initially unprepossessing 11th-century Nihavand hoard from Iran, including a fine little gold wine bowl with a perky duck motif. But everyday objects have their charm too: who'd have thought that water filters could be so beautifully worked? What's evident here too is the effect



of so much Islamic art on our culture: look at the star and cross tiles above. Very Walter Crane, no? These galleries will be crowded from the off; one of the intentions is to engage local communities. For small viewers, there are figures of birds and animals at ankle level. Brave the crowds. This is an insight into a whole world, in two rooms.

The rare and the mundane: above, left to right, a keris and sheath, Uzbek woman's ikat coat with Russian lining and a Byzantine-style incense burner

Scientific Dara is the type you want to invite to dinner

COMEDY
Dara O Briain
 Brighton Dome
 ★★★★★
Bruce Dessau

DARA O Briain studied maths, chemistry and physics at university but to watch him in full flow onstage you would think he had majored in engineering. His latest show, *Voice of Reason*, is a meticulously constructed evening of pure, undiluted comic genius.

Early on the imposing Irishman reminded us of those scientific credentials, recalling how he appeared alongside Professor Brian Cox on BBC2's *Stargazing Live* and found himself in a delicate situation, unsure whether to face the camera and ignore Cox, or face Cox and seem man-crush smitten.

This is the overture to a run of anecdotes that initially feel disparate but eventually interlock perfectly. Yarns include accounts of his bad feet, Norwegian gigs, the slo-mo train crash – his description – of Brexit and how he pursued his stolen bike on eBay. Best is his unlikely tale of becoming fake news when a website reported his death in a Dublin ravine.

There is nothing fake about the fast-talking *Mock the Week* host. He has the kind of sincere Woganesque Blarney Stone charm that allows him to be smutty without being offensive and chastise his fans while simultaneously beguiling them.

As well as delivering superb scripted material he is a formidable crowdworker, confirming this with a fusillade of ad libs inspired by audience jobs.

At one point he wondered why people would want a comedian as their dream dinner guest. He was being disingenuous. Anyone who sees O Briain on this form would be delighted to share a meal with him.

● *Eventim Apollo, W6, Oct 18 to 20 (0844 844 0444, ticketmaster.co.uk)*



Fast-talking charm: Dara O Briain