

Islam as you have never seen it before

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CRITIC-AT-LARGE



Permanent exhibition

Gallery of the Islamic World

British Museum

★★★★★

Behadings, jihad, honour killings, the seclusion of women: for a host of complex reasons, Islam routinely receives terrible press in the West. No wonder, then, that for many people, it seems like a closed and forbidding faith: scary, alien, antagonistic to British values.

The trouble, though, with simple, them-and-us narratives is that they rarely, if ever, bear much relation to reality. Which is why the new permanent Gallery of the Islamic World, opening at the British Museum on Thursday, is so refreshing.

Bursting with surprises, and challenging lazy assumptions, it presents Islam as you have never seen it before. And, while the gallery examines its subject through a very contemporary prism, it also – thankfully – draws upon good old-fashioned scholarship. In our hot-tempered era, in which rhetoric often holds sway over reality, it is a relief to find a narrative built upon solid facts.

Containing around 1,600 objects – a third more than the old Islamic gallery, which occupied an awkward, overlooked location

Punch and Judy: Karagöz and Hacivat puppet characters



at the back of the museum – the new galleries, in Rooms 42 and 43 (following Medieval Europe, and the Sutton Hoo helmet), occupy more than 7,000sq feet and offer an exemplary illustration of what the British Museum does best: marshalling a mind-boggling array of material into a lucid, overarching narrative.

This is storytelling of the grandest, most ambitious sort – offering a history of the Islamic world from the 7th century, when the religion emerged in Arabia, to the present day. Moreover, while the old gallery focused on the central Islamic lands, the new one encompasses vast swathes of the Earth's surface, from West Africa to south-east Asia.

One minute we are looking at a beautiful enamelled glass flask from Syria. The next, an Indonesian ceremonial headdress incorporating European printed cotton and paisley motifs from India (no religion, it seems, is an island). Because the new galleries can accommodate light-sensitive objects, there are around 70 vibrant textiles, bringing the Islamic world raucously to life.

Indeed, unlike the V&A, whose Islamic art gallery is a quarter of the size, the BM finds room for a great deal of archaeological and ethnographic material, as well as sumptuous art.

There are archaeological finds from Samarra, to the north of Baghdad, ivory chessmen from Sicily, an astrolabe from Turkey, and an elegant Egyptian fiddle inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Dishes from the Ottoman ceramics town of Iznik, emblazoned with tulips, appear near a patterned floor felt produced by nomadic Turkmen tribes in northern Iran.

I was beguiled by a pair of bickering puppet characters called Karagöz and Hacivat – the Punch and Judy, if you like, of Turkish shadow theatre. Karagöz, with a big, rounded beard and bulging biceps, is a rude, impulsive lout, with a winning wit. He is forever clobbering the more refined Hacivat, who likes to expound on everything from Persian literature to gardening.

The point of this sparring couple is that, before the advent of television, they provided a form of popular entertainment that could articulate ordinary people's frustrations – even, to a degree, anti-authoritarian dissent. Often, we are told that free speech only flourishes in Western democracies. As ever, the truth is more complex – and more fascinating.

So much history. So much stuff. The potential pitfall of presenting the full



BRITISH MUSEUM

Arts

Vast array: finds include an astrolabe from Turkey, left, an Ottoman ceramic dish, below, and *Standing Dove, Eating Dove*, by Manal Al Dowayan (2012), right



scope of Britain's most comprehensive collection of Islamic objects is obvious – the result could be a jumbled-up, anarchic mess, plunging visitors into a confusing cloud of unknowing, rather than offering enlightenment. But, adamant that the finished effect should avoid the higgledy-piggledy atmosphere of a bazaar, the museum enlisted architecture firm Stanton Williams to help with the design. With slate floors and



There's even a surprising Ottoman dish depicting Maryam – Arabic for Mary – holding the Christ Child

elegant wooden benches, the finished effect, which has cost "several million" pounds (the museum won't be more specific), is calm and tasteful – especially in the high-ceilinged first gallery, which has been revamped with the addition of several new windows, adorned with specially commissioned, filigree walnut screens, so that sunlight can flood in. Throughout, there are lots of lovely and ingenious touches, such as the delightful objects, including a jade terrapin and a ceramic cat, that appear at knee height, to engross children.

The central spine of each gallery is a chronological display, with objects arranged in bespoke, L-shaped cabinets – devoted, in the second room, to the major dynasties of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals. Along the walls, meanwhile, the cases are thematic, touching on everything from medicine and astrology to the legacy of the ancient world.

Some themes are provocative. One cabinet, for instance, tackles the persistent idea that Islam proscribes figurative art. You only need spend two minutes inside these galleries to recognise that this isn't true: on every side there are humans and animals – lions, camels, ibex, a peacock. There's even a surprising Ottoman dish depicting Maryam – Arabic for Mary – holding the Christ Child

on her lap. The labels are explicit: the Koran forbids the worship of idols, but does not ban representational art.

If there is an agenda to the galleries, it is two-fold. Firstly, they insist upon a globalised, international outlook. The Islamic world presented here is one of networks and interconnectivity – two central preoccupations of our time. The curators never miss a chance to emphasise links between Islamic and non-Islamic cultures: a pair of blue-and-white ceramic shoes, for instance, appears because it was produced in 17th-century Iran for the European market. Conflict is not downplayed, exactly – there is a section on iconoclasm, featuring a 14th-century lustre tile from an Iranian tomb, decorated with birds whose heads were later chipped off. But the general picture is of peoples and cultures trading with, and learning from, each other. Some visitors may find this view idealised.

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Secondly, the curators reject outright the notion of "Islamic art" – which, they argue, is a monolithic, unhelpful term, invented in the 19th century by Western scholars. In this new telling, nothing on display is "purely" Islamic. Everything has a curious hybridity – even three humble Turkmen ties embroidered with the Soviet Union's hammer-and-sickle.

Non-specialists will sense an aesthetic kinship between many far-flung objects that goes beyond the one unifying force the curators do concede: the ubiquity, as a beautiful visual device, of the Arabic script. This kinship is, of course, hard to define – but it should, perhaps, have been interrogated further.

Still, it's hard to fault something planned with such intelligence, sensitivity and rigour, displayed with a flair for visual drama that will inspire, as well as inform, for a generation.

The Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic World opens to the public on Thurs; info: britishmuseum.org

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