

arts

A thousand and one nights of Islamic treasures

The British Museum's new gallery is a delight, but you will need more than one visit, writes **Rachel Campbell-Johnston**

On Thursday the British Museum will open to the public the doors of a new chamber of treasures. The latest in a progression of newly refurbished and rehung galleries, which opens with a series of free public events, is the glittering Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic World.

Prepare to enter an Aladdin's cave. Two long-neglected spaces at the heart of the museum complex have been overhauled and brought back into use. Glass cases line the walls and march in ranks down the middle of the black stone floors. Light glitters and winks as it catches burnished metal, the lustre of inlays and the glaze of ceramics, the gleam of enamel and iridescence of silk. It picks out the intricate latticework of carvings, the prismatic colours of manuscript paintings, the filigree descriptions of decorative patterns and the serpentine flow of calligraphic scripts. Where do you start?

The more relevant question might be: where do you end?

The term "Islamic art", the curators argue, is far too limited. Brought into use in the 19th century, it conveniently labels a narrow slice of culture, but does not even begin to describe the



Right: The raven addresses the animals (c 1590). Above: Incense burner (c 1250-1300, Syria)

astonishing, multifaceted variety of the many civilisations in which the religion of Islam has played a shaping role. It is this diversity that the British Museum's new galleries set out to explore.

This is not an assemblage to be dealt with in one visit. The curators have spent three years rummaging through

“The result is a tapestry of interconnected histories

the British Museum's encyclopaedic collections before selecting 1,500 objects; their origins range from west Africa to southeast Asia and span a millennium and a half. A display that begins in pre-Islamic Arabia with the Sasanian and Byzantine art that a new breed of Islamic patrons would admire leapfrogs across cultures and continents to the present, with, most notably, an installation by Idris Khan. His series of drawings, *21 Stones*, meditates on the "Stoning of the Devil" ritual at Mecca, which involves pilgrims hurling stones at a wall.

The result is a tapestry of interconnected histories. Far from



Niagara, New York and Bahamas cruise CRUISE & STAY

RAIL TRAVEL FROM NIAGARA FALLS TO NEW YORK

12 NIGHTS FROM
£1,399
 PER PERSON

International flights and selected transfers

A three-night four-star hotel stay in Niagara Falls

Niagara Falls helicopter flight

A two-night four-star hotel stay in New York

A seven-night full-board cruise aboard Anthem of the Seas

The three thundering waterfalls of Niagara are the first stop on this adventure and are a spectacular sight to behold. During your three-night stay enjoy a thrilling helicopter flight and marvel this natural wonder from the air. Take the train to the city that truly never sleeps, New York, and visit famous landmarks including the Statue of Liberty, Empire State Building and Rockafella Centre during your two-night stay. Your holiday continues with a relaxing cruise to the Bahamas before returning to New York for your return flight to London.

Cruise itinerary highlights include: Port Canaveral - Nassau and Cococay, Bahamas.

Selected departures from November, 2018 to March, 2020.

This holiday is operated and subject to the conditions of Cruise Direction. ATOL 3973 a Global Travel Group member. Pricing is Subject to availability, single supplements and standard landline charges apply. Itineraries and holiday durations may vary by departure date.



the Islamic world from the 16th century onwards: the Ottomans, Safavids and Mughals.

Round the perimeter walls run additional displays. Each concentrates more closely on an element of the story — the development of astronomy, for instance. Scientists and thinkers from the 700s onwards are found building on pre-Islamic sources that, translated into Arabic, lead to significant advances in the study of the skies. Here you will find the astrolabes used for navigation and prediction, for locating the qibla (the direction of Mecca) or making decisions in an uncertain world. Celestial globes map the constellations; a Mughal ruler in India strikes his coins with the signs of the zodiac.

Another section explores the rich history of an oral tradition that, pre-dating Islam and the era of the written word, was developed and adapted to inspire manuscript illustrations, monumental paintings, theatrical productions and musical performances. The use of talismans for protection and healing, the close relationship between China and Iran under the Mongols, the tulips and turbans of the Ottoman rulers and the games and the pastimes enjoyed by the ordinary people are also explored.

This last casts a light on one of the most evocative aspects of this new display. The curators set out to introduce us not just to the great rulers and the precious creations of their master craftsmen, but also to the world of the ordinary people and the everyday objects they used. At one moment you might find yourself looking at the magnificent Blacas ewer. Made in Mosul, famed for the quality of its metalwork, and proudly inscribed with the name of its 13th-century maker, it shows the virtuosity of local inlay techniques. Let your eyes try to follow the fine lines of silver as they weave through the grooves cut into the brass. This is a vessel for the most wealthy drinker.

A little later, you might find yourself examining the intricate clay designs that would have strained the water that poured through the neck of an ordinary domestic jug. The delicacy of the patterns adorning so humble an object indicate how precious a resource was the water that they filtered.

The longer you look, the more fully you immerse yourself in the Islamic world. With a bit of imagination you might find yourself stepping into a Turkish hammam in a pair of wooden bath clogs, sipping the dark brew of a Yemeni coffee house, playing a game of chess with a Nigerian or preparing the trousseau for an Armenian bride.

This display, with its explanatory videos and headphones for music, is emphatically about such imaginative engagement. It is about bringing the cultural barriers down and understanding the world of Islam not, as too often, as an entity set apart, but as a part of the far wider flow of the world. Mecca, even before the 610 revelation to the Prophet Mohammed, was a centre of trade on the Arabian peninsula. With the



Enamelled glass mosque lamp (c 1330-45)

“It is not just the story of conquest and looting

spread of Islam and, with it, the tradition of the hajj pilgrimage, it became the heartland of an ever-expanding world. And with the rise of subsequent empires, other cities — Damascus, Istanbul, Baghdad, Isfahan or Delhi — became similarly the nexuses of global culture, melting pots where Arabs would mingle with Ethiopians, for example; where Iranians would meet Chinese, each sharing and adapting the other's traditions and learning, then disseminating, new techniques and ideas.

A jug made in Herat in 1100 is compared with another, strikingly similar, from Mosul made in 1232. Workers crossed borders, carrying with them their skills. Panels from a Coptic church are shown alongside mosque carvings — again, they look pretty much identical. The same craftsmen, this suggests, would have worked for mosque and church. Mamluk metalwork is exported to Europe, where it is adapted; an Ottoman sultan invites French weavers to his court. A piece of Moorish pottery from Spain pitches up in Bristol; a pair of English loafers are adapted with gold embroidery to suit Mogul tastes. In the 19th century an Iranian shah on his travels takes a liking to the tutus of European ballet dancers. Returning home, he adapts the design for his harem.

Everywhere you look you discover such cross-fertilisations — and not just across geographies, but across different media and historical periods. Arabic scripts are translated on to pottery vessels; Iraqi lustreware of the 9th century finds a new 19th-century incarnation in the Arts and Crafts ceramics of William De Morgan; the designs adorning the traditional robes of Turkmens are later adapted to be reproduced on machines.

Everywhere there is something to catch the eye. The curators dismiss the commonly held preconception that the art of the Islamic world is all about non-figurative design. It may be true that, in the mosque, geometric patterns are prevalent, but the whole of creation, be it cat, pigeon, camel, peacock, terrapin, fish or horse, crops up elsewhere. And in addition, another myth is dismissed. The British Museum's great collection does not just tell the story of conquest and

looting —

although there is plenty of that. The objects on display have

come here in all sorts of ways: a zam zam flask was donated by the 19th-century explorer Richard Burton, a memento of his escapade to Mecca disguised as a pilgrim, even though had he been discovered the punishment would have been death. Other objects were donated as diplomatic gifts, not the least significant by post-Soviet nations eager to establish their independent identities. One of the museum staff even donated a pair of his (rather splendid) shoes.

This new gallery opens up a world of new wonders to the visitor. A thousand and one nights may well pass before you have taken it all in.

The Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic World opens at the British Museum, London WC1 (020 7323 8299), on Thursday



Uzbek woman's ikat coat, 1870s-1920s

A last dance for Richard Alston

If anything signals how the world of contemporary dance has changed in the past decade, it's the announcement that Richard Alston is closing his company in 2020. He is one of the most longstanding players on the UK scene, and his London-based troupe has tirelessly toured the country for almost a quarter of a century, performing Alston's coolly abstract and musically rich choreography.

Alston is a product of the most vibrant generation in British contemporary dance, the one that emerged in the 1970s, and in terms of consistent dance-making he is the great survivor. He has continued to plough his own artistic furrow even while younger choreographers have proved trendier (Wayne McGregor), more theatrical (Akram Khan) and noisier (Hofesh Shechter). Yet Alston, 70 this month, isn't especially happy to leave the Place, the pioneering centre for contemporary dance where his company has been based since 1994.

“I didn't feel I could fight it,” he says. “The Arts Council gave the Place very strong signals that they wanted the company to receive less and less money, and for the money to go instead to the theatre to support younger artists. If I didn't agree to close the company, I would be harming the Place. The Arts Council is robbing Peter to pay Paul and I feel quite sad to be Peter.”

Still, he accepts that “change is very much in the air and inevitably it's the turn of other, younger talents, but older artists are a hugely important part of the dance ecology and the Arts Council doesn't know what to do with us. There's also a very unhealthy pressure for all organisations — even the big ballet companies — to reinvent themselves all the time and roll over backwards to do something new.”

Music has always been Alston's unique selling point, an increasingly rare commodity in a contemporary dance scene too often fuelled by mind-numbing electronic scores and simplistic head-thumping rhythms. “Good dance deserves good music and the audience deserves both, yet you see it so rarely nowadays.”

The final curtain will come down on the Richard Alston Dance Company in spring 2020 at Sadler's Wells in London and until then Alston is “putting all my energy into making sure that the last two seasons of this company are the best they have ever been. I want us to end with a cheerful bang, not a whimper.”

Debra Craine



Elly Braund and Nicholas Shikkis