

Museums Journal



Golden wonder Revealing the stories of Islamic art and culture

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How does one reflect the term “Islamic art”? It is a question that raises considerable debate, not least because it is often a catch-all phrase used to describe multiple cultures, time periods, craftsmanship, archaeology and even a variety of faiths, all of which can be displayed and interpreted in a wide range of contexts within museums.

One of the most recent examples comes from the British Museum, London, which unveiled the Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic World in October last year. The new displays cover an area stretching from Nigeria to Indonesia, from the seventh century to the present day. It brings together a variety of objects, from an exceptional collection of archaeological objects, books and musical instruments to mosaics and newly commissioned contemporary art.

“The challenge was how to convey the multi-layered nature of the material that we have in our collection and accurately represent the Islamic world,” says Ladan Akbarnia, the curator and assistant keeper of Islamic collections at the British Museum. “Before we embarked on this project, we did our due diligence. We met with groups and surveyed experiences in the former gallery. One of the things that consistently came out was that there was no sense of the human being, of the person we were meant to be representing in this gallery. So that was something that was constantly in our minds.”

The design of the new space was developed to tell this human story. “We have a linear progression in the central display, but have also teased out particular stories, which can evolve and change,” Akbarnia says. “They bring about new forms of discussion. For example, we have explored figurative imagery in Islam, which many assume is forbidden, when so much of our visual information points against that.”

The location of the gallery, in the White Wing of the museum, holds particular significance, as it is shown in dialogue with contemporaneous European civilisation.

“It makes sense for the gallery not to be on its own, like an addendum, especially considering the way Islam is presented in the news today,” Akbarnia says. “It doesn’t make sense to marginalise it – it should be in the main fabric of the building.”

Its position not only promises a large footfall, but also offers audiences the chance to reconsider how they view works from the Islamic world while drawing their own connections with objects on display.

This potential for unlocking shared histories is a principle concern of the Subject Specialist Network (SSN) for Islamic Art and Material Culture. The organisation, which is based at Birmingham Museums, offers curatorial resources, study days and financial support to museum professionals, particularly non-specialists, to increase confidence and proficiency in displaying Islamic objects. ▶

Below: a 14th-century metalwork bag from Mosul, northern Iraq, at the Courtauld Institute of Art, London. It is one of the objects going on tour in collaboration with the Subject Specialist Network for Islamic Art and Material Culture

Right: a detail of the intricate metalwork on the bag, which was made for a noblewoman of the Persian-Mongol court, c.1300-1330

Interpreting Islamic collections

Museums are working hard to better reflect and represent the diversity of Islamic art and culture. *Holly Black* reports



“After conducting a nationwide survey, we discovered that there are a considerable number of Islamic art and material culture collections throughout the UK,” says Rebecca Bridgeman, the chair of the Islamic Art and Material Culture SSN. “However, there was a great need to use them more effectively and in a 21st-century context.”

The network’s mission statement points to promoting “interconnectedness and mutual understanding between people who might otherwise see themselves as very different”. It recently announced a collaboration with the Courtauld Institute of Art, London, with funding from the Art Fund, to tour 10 exceptional Islamic metalworks to the Royal Cornwall Museum, Cartwright Hall in Bradford, the Holburne Museum in Bath and the History of Science Museum in Oxford. The collection was amassed by the British artist and collector Thomas Gambier Parry, and features one of the most remarkable examples of Islamic metalwork in existence – an intricately decorated bag made for a noblewoman of the Persian-Mongol court, from around 1300-1330.

“These objects can tell stories about transcultural identities in the non-western world and the convergence and counterpoint between east and west, because a lot of these objects were collected by Europeans,” says Alexandra Gerstein, the curator of sculpture and decorative arts at the Courtauld. “We wanted to tour these

objects in a purposeful way and it made sense to make the most of the connections that could be made in public collections.”

Community focus

While this project allows museums to unlock elements of their own collections through touring objects, other institutions have embarked on research strategies to better serve their multicultural communities. For example, the Manchester Museums Partnership has made a conscious effort to develop curatorial expertise and build lasting networks with the city’s Muslim population. A grant from the John Ellerman Foundation contributed to extensive documentation and training, allowing curators to travel internationally.

“We know it is important to help confidence levels among curators, so you can develop typological and academic information about the collection, but also pair it with getting to know our Muslim communities much better,” says Stephen Welsh, the curator of living cultures at Manchester Museum.

Understanding the sensitivity around display and interpretation has also underpinned the partnership’s learning.

“If a curator wants to display a piece of archaeology but has ethical insecurities, we now have the networks in place to ask appropriate questions,” Welsh says. “They can pick up the phone to the Muslim chaplain at the University of Manchester

or speak to people who have attended our workshops.”

Promoting inclusivity in displays has also played a role in recent exhibitions such as Four Corners of One Cloth: Textiles from the Islamic World, at the Whitworth gallery in Manchester. The show centres around the Kiswa cloth, which covers the Ka’bah – the most sacred site in Islam – and is replaced each year during the pilgrimage to Mecca. Two vitrines were left empty so that contributions from local residents could be exhibited, which built a direct dialogue with real Mancunian lives.

“Our narrative stressed that the Islamic world is local and global, and that Manchester is as much a part of it as any other city,” says Uthra Rajgopal, the assistant curator, textiles and wallpaper, at the Whitworth. “As we received more objects and textiles than anticipated, we decided to use one of the end walls in the gallery and a small display case.”

The show also operates as a springboard for an upcoming exhibition, Beyond Faith: Muslim Women Artists Today, which highlights five artists at different stages in their career.

“It showcases the diversity of Muslim women artists in Britain today and provides a space for their work in dialogue with the art collection,” says Saskia Warren, a lecturer in human geography at the University of Manchester and academic lead for the project. “It also offers an exciting ▶

Right: a page from the 16th-century Hamzanama, a series of Indian paintings on cloth, part of the Islamic collection at the British Museum

Far right: an enamelled glass mosque lamp, c.1330-45, from Egypt or Syria, at the British Museum



Facing page: star and cross tiles, 1266-67, believed to be from the interior of a shrine in northern Iran, are part of the British Museum’s collection



opportunity for the Whitworth and the university to work with minority female artists who have been under-represented in British public collections and exhibitions.”

In many ways, this collaborative enterprise is a world away from traditional interpretations of historical collections and signifies an interesting conversation around different approaches. The consensus is that artists should not be defined by their faith or heritage, but that does not mean institutions should shy away from artists’ investigations of multicultural heritage.

Diverse points of view

Janet Boston, the curator of craft and design at Manchester Art Gallery (MAG), explains the beauty of this multiplicity in the gallery’s new exhibition Halima Cassell: Eclectica – Global Inspirations.

“One of the earliest pieces in the show, Mancunian Roofscapes 2005, conveys the convergence of Cassell’s Islamic heritage in that its design is geometrically organised, yet inspired by the rooflines found in northern terraced houses,” Boston says. “You see the two things beautifully synthesised in one work.”

The artist explores a wealth of influences in her carved sculptures, as well as global connections across technique and pattern.

“Whatever part of the world we are from, we all have that connection to art,” Boston says. “Visual culture emphasises that we have more in common with each

other than anything that separates us.”

The power of placing contemporary works of art in dialogue with historical objects was also evident in the South Asian Design exhibition held at MAG last year. It showcased traditional craft alongside new pieces of art, design and fashion, including a new acquisition, *After All It’s Always Someone Else Who Dies* by the Karachi-based artist Adeela Suleman. She is known for exploring issues of violence and loss, and incorporating Islamic metalwork on a grand scale. This piece offers many points of entry for a diverse audience, who might connect with the iconography or craft, or on a purely aesthetic level.

Such displays can lead to fresh dialogue and understanding, but getting new audiences to cross the museum threshold, particularly those who might assume displays will be insensitive or alienating, is still a challenge. Often, a direct approach can prove successful, as was the case for the acquisition of three neon text sculptures by the Pakistani artist Waqas Khan. The *Khushamdeed* series, which each say “welcome” in Urdu, are positioned outside MAG, the Whitworth and Manchester Museum to encourage visitors and promote a “judgement-free passage”.

“It has been a real breakthrough,” says Boston, “because people from all walks of life respond to that welcome message.”

Holly Black is a freelance writer

Breaking down barriers

Anti-Islamic rhetoric has increased in recent years, sparked by the legacy of 9/11 and subsequent terrorist attacks, and compounded by issues such as Brexit and the refugee crisis. According to the monitoring group Tell Mama (Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks) incidents of Islamophobia in the UK increased by 27% in 2017, with women targeted the most.

Hostilities have also been reported in the arts sector, including an incident at the Royal College of Art, London, in 2016, when a woman vandalised a work by student Yazmeen Sabri that featured a burqa on a metal stand.

The year before, a van belonging to a tourist family bearing the slogan “Iran is great”, which was parked outside London’s Science Museum, led to the venue being evacuated by police.

The September 11 Memorial Museum in New York provoked criticism when it opened

in 2014, on the ground that a film titled *The Legacy of al-Qaeda* did little to differentiate between extremism and Islam.

In light of such incidents, institutions have begun various forms of research and discussion. For example, the Jewish Museum Berlin held a conference last year titled *Living with Islamophobia* to discuss international perspectives.

Similarly, the Institute of Arab and Islamic Art in New York is a not-for-profit hub that encourages dialogue between curators, scholars and artists from different faiths.

And the UK-based Muslim Museum Initiative offers online resources including a timeline of British Muslim history, a list of living artists who identify with Islam, and learning materials. The initiative was founded by the social entrepreneur Mobeen Butt and the Asian Youth Alliance Foundation. The aim is to open a permanent space in the future.



Left: Flow, a statuary marble sphere, is on display in the Manchester Art Gallery show Halima Cassell: Eclectica – Global Inspirations

Facing page: After All It’s Always Somebody Else, a work by the Karachi-based artist Adeela Suleman, was on display at Manchester Art Gallery in 2018