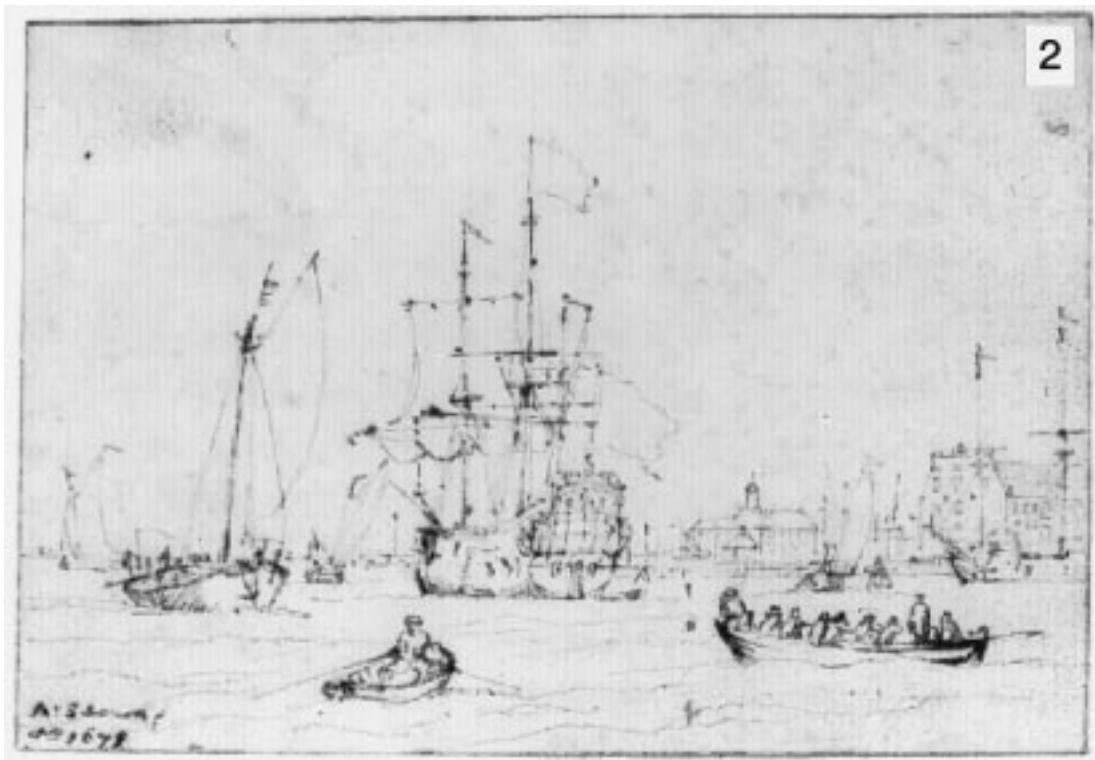
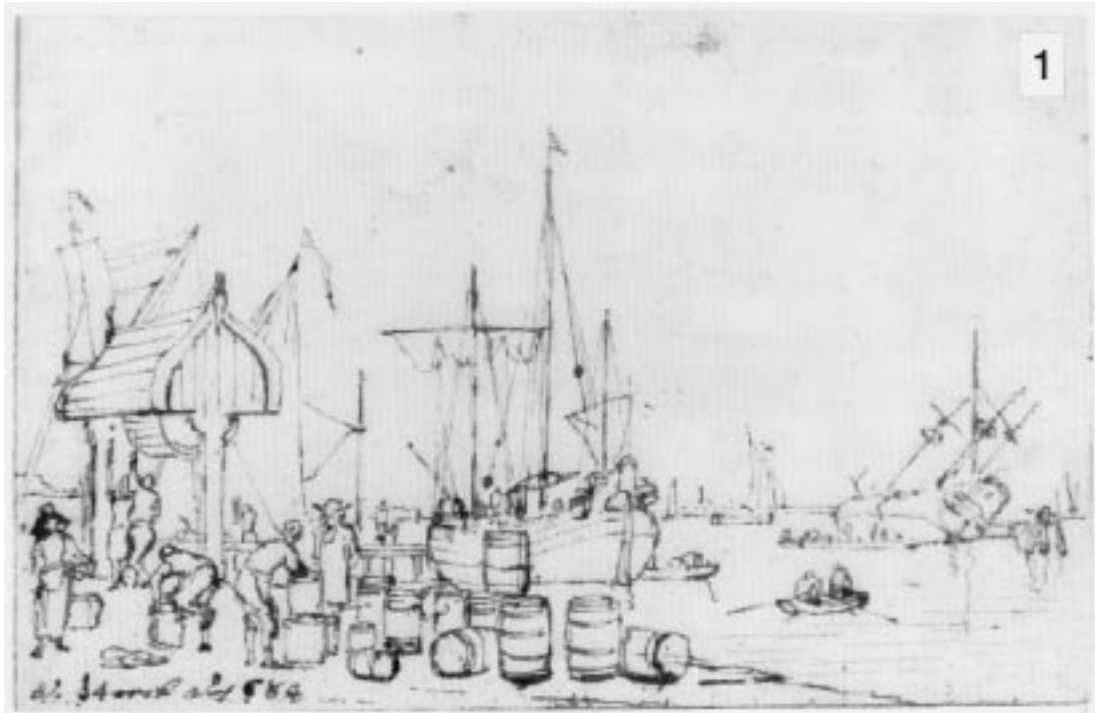


# Museum International

Islamic collections

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# STOLEN

*Two pen-and-ink drawings on paper by Abraham Storck: Photograph No. 1, harbour scene, signed and dated '1684' at bottom left, and measuring 9.7 × 15 cm; Photograph No. 2, river scene, signed and dated '167?' at bottom left, and measuring 9.4 × 14 cm. Stolen from a museum in Amsterdam on 19 May 1997. (Reference 6.165.1/97.8103/9751955, Interpol, The Hague).*

*Photo by courtesy of the ICPO–Interpol General Secretariat, Lyons (France).*

# Guest editorial

## Exhibiting the art of the Muslim world

*The Islamic world has embraced a huge geographic span over many centuries and its arts are of unparalleled variety and beauty, in many cases setting standards that have been unmatched anywhere. This special dossier is intended to present readers with the range of issues confronting museums in collecting, preserving and displaying this rich heritage, and in presenting it to the public in a meaningful way. Our indispensable guide on this complex question was Oleg Grabar, one of the foremost specialists on the subject of Islamic art. Professor at the School of Historical Studies of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, former Aga Khan Professor of Islamic Art and Architecture at Harvard University, past director of the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem, Honorary Curator of Near Eastern Art at the Smithsonian Institution's Freer Gallery of Art until 1969, Near Eastern editor of *Ars Orientalis* from 1957 to 1970, etc.: the list of his prestigious positions, honours and awards is inexhaustible. He is currently a member of the international scientific committee of UNESCO's Bayt al-Hikma (House of Wisdom) project which seeks to shed light on the contribution of Islamic civilization to the scientific, intellectual and artistic heritage of humanity. He was kind enough to provide us with the following guest editorial, which presents a brief overview of the various approaches to Islamic art adopted by museums today.*

There are, at the end of the twentieth century, four types of museums in which works of Islamic art can be found.

The first one is the primarily Western creation of the more or less universal museum, such as the Louvre in Paris, the Hermitage in St Petersburg, the British Museum in London, the newly consolidated Berlin Museum, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Works from Muslim lands occupy a percentage of a usually huge space and this percentage varies according to acquisitions, donations or other considerations.

The second type, also mostly found in the West, is the specialized museum. It could be a generally 'Oriental' or 'Asian' museum like the Freer Gallery and the Sackler Museum in Washington and the Museum of the Art of the Peoples of Asia in Moscow, or else a specifically 'Islamic' museum such as the one attached to the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris or the Leo Mayer Museum in Jerusalem. Another form of specialized museum with frequently large collections of Islamic art is the museum devoted to techniques, such as the Musée de la Céramique at Sèvres, near Paris, the Corning Glass Museum at Corning, New York, or the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C., as well as the museum attached to the Abegg Foundation in Riggisburg near Basle. Numismatic museums exist as well, for example, the one attached to the American Numismatic Society in New York. Within this category of specialized museums should be included the private museum exhibiting one individual's collection, usually restricted to a technique or a theme; examples exist in Western Europe and in Beirut and Kuwait.

The third type of museum is the national museum found in nearly every country of the world and favoured particularly by all newly independent countries. Such museums are designed to reflect the history of a land, and every country with an Islamic past or with a significant Muslim population today has devoted a section of its national museum to Islamic art. At times, as in Istanbul or Cairo, separate buildings house Islamic collections, but they form part of an officially sanctioned sequence of institutions dedicated to the preservation of a country's past. National museums often reflect political and ideological judgements on history or culture and their message often requires them to include ethnographic and archaeological exhibitions as well as reconstructions of ways of life in addition to more standard works of art.

Finally, there is the special case of libraries. Their exhibition facilities are not always of the highest order, but they are the guardians of most of the manuscripts and albums with illuminations, paintings and works of calligraphic art which are among the glories of Islamic art.

Each of these categories has its own expectations and its own demands on technical or intellectual expertise. In practice, there is also a certain amount of conflation and overlap between types, as historical circumstances or the availability of space compel complicated mixes. Such is the case with the Top Kapi Seray in Istanbul, where, in a setting of historical significance and dramatic location, all but the first of my categories appear in the range and quality of the collections and in the manner of their presentation.

It is, of course, possible to look at these museums with significant holdings in Islamic art in another way than that of their institutional structure. For that very structure has created, at times perhaps merely reflected, the views on Islamic art held by scholars or by the general public. Because so much of Islamic art consists of objects in many different techniques and of an almost infinite range of quality, museums are compelled to make choices in what they acquire, exhibit, or publish. But they have to do so without being provided with the rather forceful hierarchy of genres, techniques and artists developed in post-Renaissance Western art. The manner of their decisions will form the taste of the public and identify the norms by which Islamic art will be evaluated. Museums control access to the basic information available to professionals or to amateurs. Their responsibility lies in meeting the needs of large audiences, from local schoolchildren to visiting scholars and tourists. They can best fulfil this obligation by preserving and caring for their treasures, by guiding visitors in the complex history and aesthetic message of Islamic art, and by making their collections known even to those who cannot visit them. These aims are not always compatible, and the true role of a museum is to establish a proper equilibrium among them.

OLEG GRABAR

# Permanent exhibitions: a variety of approaches

Adel T. Adamova

*The State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg has adopted a unique way of exhibiting its rich Islamic collection, one which reflects its vocation as a 'single museum of world culture and art'. But different concepts prevail in other museums, which seek to highlight the particularities of the Islamic artistic vision, and these contrasting principles also have their validity according to Adel T. Adamova, senior research associate/curator of medieval Persian art in the Oriental Department at the Hermitage. She is the author of three books (Miniatures in Kashmiri Manuscripts, The Miniatures in the Manuscript of the Poem 'Shahnama' of 1333, and Persian Paintings and Drawings of the Fifteenth to Nineteenth Centuries in the Hermitage Collection) and some thirty articles on various subjects connected with medieval Persian painting.*

The limits in time and space of the art we habitually refer to as Islamic are vast, stretching from the seventh to the nineteenth century, and from the Atlantic Ocean to China. Islamic art consists of works created by the peoples of the many Eastern countries conquered by the Arabs in the seventh to eighth centuries and brought under the single state of the Arab Caliphate, which by the ninth century had already broken up into a number of independent states. The political and even the ethnic frontiers in this territory changed many times during the Middle Ages, and more often than not they do not coincide with the frontiers of the contemporary states in which Islam is even now the dominant religion. This art, which took shape under the powerful influence of Islam, emerged on a complex foundation of the traditions of the great civilizations of the Mediterranean, the Near and Middle East, and was characterized by its variety. However original the path of the development of Islamic art, it was continually encountering cultures that had evolved on the basis of other religions. Displaying Islamic art to a broad public in a museum so as to demonstrate all the particular features of its emergence and development, and so that it appears in all its richness and diversity, poses a difficult problem. The road to exhibitions of Islamic art in museums was long and hard and was the outcome of the collecting activities and research of more than one generation of museum curators.

The aim of this article is to review in broad outline the exhibitions of art from Islamic countries currently to be found in different museums and to endeavour to answer the question about whether there is (or can be proposed) an optimum way of displaying Islamic art in a museum. It is principally about what are called permanent exhibitions, which are set up for a long period

(for as long as they correspond to the current level of knowledge) and which become an integral part of a museum's exhibitions as a whole. Temporary exhibitions, unlike permanent ones, exist in museums in an autonomous sort of way alongside the main exhibitions and have their own characteristics and purposes. This article is too limited in scope to take a detailed look at temporary exhibitions of the art of Islamic countries (which usually deal with one theme or a group of works). Exhibitions of this sort also have their own history and could by themselves be the subject of research, as even a cursory review of the exhibitions staged in different museums over the entire century yields an interesting picture of changing priorities at various stages in the study of Islamic art. The article does not deal with specific exhibition issues such as creating the exhibition's visual impact, though such matters also warrant special consideration if only because an exhibition of Islamic art consists in the main of very varied items (ceramics, bronzes, textiles, carpets, books, and so on), and this often calls for particular display solutions.

In the nineteenth century, in exhibitions staged in the major museums of world art such as the Louvre, the British Museum, the Berlin Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Hermitage, Oriental art was represented only by objects from the Ancient East (Egypt, Sumeria, Assyria and Babylon). Works from the Islamic East already in the possession of the museums were lost among other art treasures and very little research had been done on them at the time. In 1890 in the Louvre, and slightly later in the other museums, specialist Islamic departments began to be established, studying the museums' holdings and adding to them by way of archaeological expeditions. After a few decades,

rich and varied collections of Islamic art had been assembled in the museums. An enormous amount of work was also done on studying and classifying them. At that time, exhibition work was confined to the staging of temporary exhibitions introducing the general public to a culture about which they had no previous knowledge. For instance, the exhibitions of illuminated Persian manuscripts, held in Munich and Paris in 1910–12, revealed to the West the aesthetic values of medieval Eastern painting. Approaches to the study of Oriental art changed many times throughout almost the whole of the century and this is reflected in the principles guiding the establishment of permanent exhibitions in museums.

### The Hermitage: a precursor

The general conception of exhibitions of art from countries of the East was defined at the Hermitage earlier than in other museums. It came into being in direct association with the academic traditions of Russian Oriental studies as a whole. Already at the end of the nineteenth and the start of the twentieth century, ways of looking at the culture of the East as part of a single global process had emerged in Russian academic circles and the study of the history of the East was recognized to be essential to an understanding of world history.<sup>1</sup> The establishment in 1920 at the Hermitage of a Department of the Islamic East was an undoubted acknowledgement of the significant role of the peoples of the East in the development of world culture. However, this name, which followed the standard that had emerged in Europe, was dropped a year later when the department expanded with the addition of new collections, and it became known as the Caucasus, Persia and Central Asia Department. The need for such an expansion in



© L. G. Kheifetz, State Hermitage Photographic Studio

the programme was explained by the fact that 'the integrity and continuity of the culture of the countries after which the department is named, are not conducive to the dispersal of material among different departments on a chronological basis, nor do they permit the stratification of material on the basis of the predominance of any particular historical factor, and certainly not the religious factor, which has never been more than just one of the governing forces.'<sup>2</sup>

In 1926 at the Hermitage, there was a strong and independent Oriental Department whose academic and practical activity from the outset was of a research nature and was directed in the first instance at studying the historical process of the development and continuity of cultures, their roots and traditions. The first 'Oriental' exhibitions at the Hermitage, *Sassanid Antiquities* (1921) and *Muslim Tiles* (1923), revealed the wealth of the Hermitage collections and helped to accelerate the transfer to the new department of Oriental objects dispersed in the various subdepartments of the museum. The next exhibition, *The Muslim East* (1925), included medieval works from Persia, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Egypt and other countries. The exhibition items were displayed in groups of materials: metal, ceramics, glass, carpets, textiles and so on, since in this exhibition attention was chiefly directed to the connection and

*Ceramics from the ninth to the eleventh century with Arabic inscriptions, from the Culture and Art of Central Asia exhibition.*



*Silver vessels from the tenth to the twelfth century, from the Culture and Art of Central Asia exhibition.*

interdependence of the various kinds of art, their techniques and decoration.

Of particularly great significance was the splendid temporary exhibition held in 1935 for the third International Congress on Persian Art and Archaeology, where the task was to show the history of Persian culture from earliest times to the present. Persia was represented as a powerful cultural centre, which had exercised enormous influence on its neighbours. The 1935 exhibition in the main set the pattern for exhibitions based on the historical and artistic development of countries. A major role was played by the exhibition system that had developed by that time at the Hermitage. Even when the 1925 exhibition was being put together, attention was drawn to its exceptional significance, determined by its surroundings (the exhibition was set up in the Small Hermitage), 'as an indissoluble link with that picture of the history of art and the general history of culture, which the entire Hermitage presents.'<sup>3</sup> The exhibition system at the Hermitage was developed in the mid-nineteenth century, when, next to the Tsar's residence, a building to serve as a museum was constructed, with the Antiquities Department housed on the ground floor and the art of Western Europe on the first. The nature of the museum – a treasure-house of world art – predetermined the principle of arranging material by country (Italy, Holland,

Flanders, Germany, France, England) with chronological order observed inside each exhibition, and adoption of the method of the all-inclusive display of items.

From 1935, the permanent exhibitions of the Oriental Department were set up one after the other (the work was interrupted by the Second World War but was continued in the 1950s). Ancient Egypt (the display concluded with objects from Graeco-Roman and Byzantine Egypt), and Babylon and Assyria (with the addition of items from Palmyra) were traditionally presented as separate exhibitions. The remaining exhibitions were organized either by country (China, India, Turkey, Mongolia or Japan), from antiquity to the late Middle Ages, or by cultural region. Considering how closely interwoven the political and cultural life of the peoples of Central Asia had been in the past, and how culture and art had been shared at all stages of development, it was considered appropriate to set up a single exhibition *The Culture and Art of Central Asia* (1940). The exhibition on the Caucasus was organized in a similar way – from Late Bronze and Early Iron Age objects from the Caucasus and from Urartu to nineteenth-century items, although for ancient times and the Middle Ages, separate geocultural regions were designated in which the Islamic art of Azerbaijan, in particular, was juxtaposed with Christian exhibits from Armenia and Georgia. Another exhibition, entitled *Culture and Art of the Near and Middle East*, displayed Persian art from the Sassanids to the nineteenth century.

As part of this same exhibition there was a display of the art of Syria, Iraq and Egypt (separately in three rooms). Only here was the general principle not observed: Islamic items from Mesopotamia and Egypt were separated from older ones

that had existed on those same territories, though their closeness to Coptic items would demonstrate the preservation of old traditions in the artistic products of Fatimid Egypt, especially in textiles. The art of Islamic Spain (for the most part glazed ceramics) is kept and is on display in the Western European department. It thus turned out historically that, unlike other major museums of world art, the Hermitage does not have a specialist Islamic department or a separate display of art from the Islamic East. The objects are displayed in a few of the museum's permanent exhibitions as medieval art from the relevant country.

Although to keep pace with increasingly accurate information about attributions, changes have been continually made to the exhibitions put together some decades ago, they need to be improved, and this concerns not only purely practical exhibition matters but also the intellectual content of the exhibitions. At present, while work is proceeding on the Central Asia exhibition, the curators have introduced a new theme – steppe and city, nomadic and urban cultures, thanks to which the exhibition is being fundamentally renewed and expanded. However, the historical principle of object display is being retained. It will obviously continue to be dominant in the future, too, since it corresponds, as previously, both to the direction in which the Oriental Department's research work is going and to the exhibition principles that have been adopted by the Hermitage. Thanks to the singleness of direction that these principles impart to the exhibitions, the integral form of the museum is being preserved. The Hermitage, which has such varied collections, is seen by visitors not as a collection of museums under one roof but as a single museum of world culture and art.

### Exhibiting unity and diversity

The establishment of permanent exhibitions in European museums and the Metropolitan Museum of Art relates to the 1970s to 1990s when Oriental studies in the West took a new turn. More and more frequently, books were published whose authors represented Islamic civilization as a single entity. Questions of the continuity and originality of the culture of the regions were pushed to the background. Emphasis was laid on studying the general problems of Islamic civilization, research was carried out on the underlying principles of Islamic culture, and an understanding was sought of the most characteristic general features and particularities of Islamic art. It called for a different approach and a different way of displaying the culture and art of the Islamic world. One after another, exhibitions of Islamic art began to open in museums (in 1971 at the Berlin Museum, in 1975 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, at the British Museum in 1988 and at the Louvre in 1994). Naturally, the idea of a common artistic language throughout the Islamic world and the revelation of its most essential features became paramount, including when the *Dar al-Athar al-Islamiya* exhibition was mounted in the Kuwait Museum of Islamic Arts, opened in 1983. Here, a collection was put on display for the first time to the general public that had been put together over many years by Sheikh Nasir Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah and Sheikha Hussah al-Sabah. Numerous objects, previously dispersed throughout the world, were displayed together. The collection was constituted in such a way that it displayed works of art from all the regions of the Islamic world. Its richness, diversity and breadth of coverage in space and time (from the ninth to the eighteenth century, from Spain to India) make it at present



*The Culture and Art of the Near and Middle East exhibition featured these silver and bronze artefacts from eighth- to ninth-century Persia.*

one of the largest collections of art from the Islamic East. The designers of the exhibition were clearly guided by the desire to present the artistic culture of Islam as a single, mutually interdependent world in all its richness and diversity.<sup>4</sup>

The key to the construction of the exhibitions of Islamic art in all these museums was the theory of unity and diversity in Islam, the starting point for any research into the culture and art of the peoples of the Islamic East. The unity and community of the culture based on the Koran and Islamic traditions is demonstrated by the very fact of setting up a separate exhibition, and the diversity is reflected in the way it is put together. It is not possible within the limits of this article to look in greater detail at the way material is distributed in each of the museums. Exhibitions are very different, and this is due in the first instance to the different composition and character of each collection (for example, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art they have and exhibit an extremely rich collection of carpets, something the British Museum never collected). The different structure of the museums and the traditions of research and exhibition work that developed at them also have an influence. The Metropolitan Museum of Art shows, in one area, objects first from the Seljuk and

then from the Mongol era, and further on arranges material by country and region: the Arab countries, Persia, Turkey and India. Many ideas are put into practice in the exhibition, including the holding of discussions. The strong point of this museum is the temporary exhibitions that are frequently organized and, as a rule, are devoted to an important topical problem or even a theory.<sup>5</sup> The exhibition at the British Museum is constructed on the principle of the division of the Islamic world into West (North Africa, Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Turkey) and East (Persia, Afghanistan, North India), with material displayed in chronological order by dynasty within each of them.

#### **A constantly growing body of knowledge**

The basic difficulty in constructing exhibitions of Islamic art is that a general periodization of Islamic art does not yet exist. In the academic literature, including the most recent works, the material is predominantly divided by dynasty, which virtually means according to the flourishing of artistic culture in a particular region under particular rulers. This tendency is reflected in the Louvre exhibition, opened in 1994, where each room presents the art of a specific geopolitical region. It is still an exhibition that can be looked round easily and clearly presents no difficulties for the visitor. However, in and of itself, the dynastic principle of arranging exhibited material should be recognized as a dead end. As our knowledge grows, new groups of objects will increasingly emerge connected with particular courts. These local historical and artistic attributions, which are extremely valuable and important to specialists, will lead to an ever greater amount of detail in exhibitions. Islamic culture breaks down



into an immense number of constituent parts, or 'periods' (Bosfort's book *Muslim Dynasties* describes about 150 of the most important dynasties of the Islamic world), which an onlooker is already unable to take in. It is quite obvious that what is needed are more general divisions.

Given our present level of knowledge, the best solution would be a division along territorial lines, all the more so as such a division has been fixed for a long time: Persia, Central Asia, and the Islamic states of India, Asia Minor and the countries of the Arab East. This makes the task of dividing material up by era within each of them easier. From the point of view of general Islamic culture, a division by era is not possible until the question is settled as to whether there were synchronous processes taking place in various territories with such different historical fortunes, and whether all regions were encompassed by the same shared processes. The problem of periodization at present is most difficult and acute. What we are discussing is periodization in which changes of era, artistic styles, the emergence of other ideals, other subjects and so on, would be reflected, that is to say, an understanding of the internal principles governing the emergence and development of Islamic art (if this is generally possible in full measure for the various regions).

Therefore, concluding the overview of existing exhibitions, it must be stressed that two approaches have evolved, of which one is represented only at the Hermitage and the other is what reigns, as it were, in the other museums. Although in form they pursue different aims, they nevertheless fulfil the same task in that they provide a picture of the cultural life of the Islamic peoples of the East. Under the first approach, examples



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of the artistic culture of countries and regions are displayed from a historical perspective, with stress laid on the fact that each nation has its own history and that there was a continuous link with pre-Islamic art; the roots are shown of preceding civilizations which entered Islamic culture or were rejected by it. The second approach demonstrates the existence in the Middle Ages of an integrated Islamic culture and of a common creative method underlying the unique characteristics of art from the different regions.

Each of these two types of exhibition has its shortcomings and its strong points. Islamic art developed slowly and gradually and the transition from one stage to another is not very clear. To the uninitiated viewer, Islamic art in its temporal dimension can seem monotonous. At the same time, 'horizontally' in the geo-

*Examples of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Persian art from the Culture and Art of the Near and Middle East exhibition.*

graphical sense, by cultural region, this art is more diverse and the differences are very noticeable. The visitor gets an idea of how general aesthetic tenets were interpreted differently in each country or region. This is undoubtedly the advantage of the separate, special display of Islamic art which enables objects from different ends of the Islamic world to be compared. However, the originality of the regions is demonstrated here but not explained; a real historical perspective is lost, the history of how this art came into being is left out, and the foundations and sources that shaped the originality of the artistic culture of the different countries where Islam became the principal religion are not shown. Account must also be taken of the changes occurring in relation to their artistic heritage in contemporary Islamic countries. Not only the art of the Islamic period but the legacy of the ancient civilizations that existed previously in Egypt and Mesopotamia, to say nothing of Persia and Central Asia, are seen by the peoples living there as their own artistic heritage and as works created by their ancestors. There is clear testimony to this in the contemporary art of the countries of the East, and in their endeavour to create their own national school, present-day artists are turning not only to medieval but also to ancient art.

The development of a single universal approach to the display of objects from the culture and art of the Islamic countries of the East is not pragmatic. The ways and means of displaying this art and the choice of ideas for the exhibition in each museum are determined by the contents of the collection, its chronological and territorial compass, the traditions concerning the display of items that have grown up in the museum, and the direction of the research work done there. No one exhibition can repeat another.

Quite clearly, it is precisely through the variety of the exhibitions that the different aspects of the richest and most distinctive civilization can be demonstrated. ■

### Notes

1. V. Bartol'd, *Istorija izu . . . enija Vostoka v Evrope i Rossii* [History of the Study of the East in Europe and Russia], 2nd ed., p. 34, Leningrad, 1925.
2. I. Orbeli, *Musul'manskij Vostok* [The Islamic East], p. 1, Leningrad, State Hermitage, 1925.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
4. See Sheikha Hussah al-Sabah, 'Rescue in Kuwait: A United Nations Success Story', *Museum International*, No. 197 (Vol. 50, No. 1, 1998). At the time of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the museum building was irreparably damaged and many objects destroyed. However, the collection continues to grow and hope of reviving the museum is not lost. Clearly, in the near future, the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiya will become the most representative museum of Islamic art in the world.
5. A number of extremely interesting exhibitions of this kind have been organized in recent years at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. They have included *Illustrated Poetry and Epic Images. Persian Painting of the 1330s and 1340s*, by Marie Lukens Swietochowski and Stefano Carbone, with essays by A. H. Morton and Tomoko Masuya (exhibition catalogue, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994); *Following the Stars: Images of the Zodiac in Islamic Art*, by Stefano Carbone (exhibition catalogue, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997).

# The curator's dilemma: dispelling the mystery of exotic collections

Sheila Canby

*How to display a very rich collection and make it meaningful to a public generally unfamiliar with the cultural and historical context of the works is one of the major challenges faced by the British Museum, whose holdings of Islamic pottery are considered the best outside the Islamic world. Sheila Canby, assistant keeper in the Department of Oriental Antiquities, explains what is being done.*

In Europe and North America curators in museums of art and history face a challenge when exhibiting collections of artefacts unrelated to their own country or broader cultural background. Although the diversity of the populations there guarantees that Muslim visitors will find their way to an Islamic gallery, curators must plan for a broader public unfamiliar with much of what they see. The larger and more complex the collection, the more essential it is that curators and their teams of designers, editors, and technicians plan the installation clearly and support it with labels, maps, gallery guides and programmes that contribute to the viewers' understanding and enjoyment. While no single formula for success in a museum installation exists, curators have at their disposal a variety of means to communicate information about their collections.

## The written word

The starting point of any museum installation is the artefact, be it an item of practical use, a painting, a sculpture or an architectural fragment. The object on display can provide visual, non-verbal information about itself, but most visitors do not want to view objects without knowledge of their historical context. Thus, the most basic form of information on a museum object is its label. A simple label will identify the object, its place of origin and date, its material, its donor and its registration or accession number. While some visitors will find this amount of information sufficient, the casual museum-goer will probably not know exactly where Susa is or much about the technique of applying decoration to glass. Thus, a sentence or two appended to the label could explain the significance of Susa as an ancient and early Islamic

archaeological site and what types of glass decoration were practised in ninth-century Iran. At the British Museum such labels are limited to seventy-five words. While forcing some discipline on the curator, this limitation may help the visitor to avoid label fatigue and increase the time spent looking at the object.

Although some museums adhere to the principle of isolating star objects by placing them alone on a pedestal, most large Islamic collections – at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Louvre and the British Museum, for example – are exhibited contextually. It is at this point that curators must consider the big picture. Not only must they balance the display in terms of historical period and geography but also in terms of medium and the strengths of the collection. Whereas at the Metropolitan and the Louvre, numerous rooms were available at the time of reinstallation, at the British Museum the entire Islamic display had to fit into one medium-sized gallery.

Despite the differences in available space, the curators of all three Islamic collections shared a similarity of approach to exhibiting them. Each museum has an introductory space in which notable objects from various places and periods are displayed. By their beauty, size or virtuosity these dazzling pieces draw visitors into the Islamic section. This space provides a complement to object labels in the form of an information panel explaining the temporal and geographical scope of the galleries that follow and a map of the regions represented by the collection. The galleries or cases that follow are then organized chronologically from the seventh to the nineteenth or twentieth century and by region. Fewer seventh- and eighth-century objects are extant than those of the ninth century on, so less



*A favourite piece of the British Museum public, this massive, 20-cm-high jade terrapin, c. 1600, is attributed to the Mughal Empire and was found at the bottom of a cistern in Allababad, India. However, the turtle is an avatar of Vishnu so scholars of Hindu India also claim it as one of their objects. From the bequest of Thomas Wilkinson Esq.*

space is allotted to the earliest pieces. In the original installation of the Metropolitan Museum's present Islamic galleries, the earliest pieces were shown in a range of small cases. By combining objects of different media which were adorned with very similar motifs, the curators emphasized the stylistic unity of late eighth- and ninth-century Islamic art from Iraq and Egypt. Such a careful choice of works with obvious visual correspondences can impart as much about an object and its context as a written label. Likewise, the room at the Louvre filled with Mameluke metalwork or the case in the British Museum overflowing with medieval Iranian lustreware ceramics impresses the viewer with the sheer quantity of such material as much as with the merit of the individual pieces in each group.

Curators in large museums with high visitor numbers have less trouble convincing their superiors of the need to inform people of different ages and levels of specialization about the collections in their charge. By contrast, museums with financial problems or low attendance

seem increasingly reluctant to invest any money or staff time in supplementary materials. At the British Museum, portable, written information is provided in the form of inexpensive illustrated gallery guides, short books on aspects of Islamic art, such as metalwork, tiles or painting, and specialist catalogues of parts of the permanent collection. The brief of the curators who write these short books is to make the subject intelligible to interested adults or undergraduates.

The audience for gallery guides is more amorphous than that for books, and as a result there is less agreement between curators and educationalists within the museum about how to pitch them. At the moment the British Museum is in its second generation of Islamic gallery guides. Since the 1989 version the price has doubled, the type size of the text has increased and colour images have replaced black and white. As the quality of printing and presentation has improved, the amount and sophistication of information has declined. In part, the increase in type size, dictated by the need to provide better access for the partially

sighted, has led to the decrease in space for written information. Yet, educationalists firmly maintain that the public who buy the guides do not want too much information. Additionally, designers wish to keep gallery guides uniform throughout the museum no matter what the subject. As a result, dynastic charts, maps and general historical information have been omitted from the Islamic guide, which is unfortunate, since some of the greatest objects in the collection were produced for rulers of minor dynasties in obscure cities of the Middle East. Instead, each object illustrated is accompanied by an explanatory paragraph, which sheds some light on the production and use of the object but very little on its historical context. The third generation of gallery guides may incorporate more information, but for now curators will have to seek other means of augmenting the labels and information panels in the gallery.

### The spoken word

A standard means of amplifying written information in museum galleries is the spoken word. While taped tours of exhibitions in the form of audiophones provide an expensive adjunct to labels and gallery guides, tours with docents or curators are perennially popular with visitors. The docents or volunteer guides are trained and managed primarily by museum education departments with the help of specialist curators. Over time some docents become quite knowledgeable about the collections, but even beginners are expected to have enough information to be able to lecture on the exhibits and answer questions. As one would expect, curators should be able to bridge the gap between the general introduction to the collections and more arcane, theoretical or newly discovered



© British Museum

information in their field. The advantage of gallery talks over labels and gallery guides is the interaction between the speaker and the audience. Visitors' queries can lead the discussion in unanticipated directions, which can be stimulating for the whole group. However, this medium of communication does have certain drawbacks. Not every docent has enough depth of knowledge to answer difficult questions, and not all curators have the ability or tolerance to explain the basic facts of their field as well as more complex ideas. Yet the advantages of direct contact with the museum audience far outweigh the disadvantages and help keep museum professionals aware of what museum visitors are seeking.

*Two glass bottles with applied disks, Iraq, ninth to tenth century, excavated at Susa by W. K. Loftus.*

Another level of spoken communication takes place not in the gallery but in the lecture hall. Regularly scheduled lectures are part of most museums' educational



*The Blacas ewer, northern Mesopotamia, Mosul, dated 1232, brass inlaid with copper and silver, by Shuja ibn Man'a. This is the diagnostic piece for the study of Islamic inlaid metalwork in the period just after the Mongol invasion of Iran, which has enabled scholars to attribute a corpus of related works to this period and school.*

programmes and allow for much greater flexibility than gallery talks. While speakers are often urged to relate their talks to museum objects, this can take the form of lectures on architectural sites from which collections come, archaeology in regions represented in museum collections, or even historical figures portrayed on museum objects. Variations on the single lecture include lecture series and study days. Lecture series on narrow subjects require a commitment over a

period of time, not easily achieved by many busy people, whereas loosely structured series attract a combination of repeat and one-time visitors. Study days in which four or five speakers talk on related aspects of a subject – the Silk Route or Damascus, to name but two – appeal to many subscribers, who enjoy punctuating lectures with tea and coffee breaks and a decent lunch. Do the people in these audiences share the same motives? Probably not. Some people really do want to learn about a thousand years of architecture in one day, while others may be planning a trip or reminiscing about one already taken. The public's abiding interest in and willingness to pay for such activities demonstrates the desire to reinforce the experience of visiting museum collections through contact with curators, scholars and docents who can bring to life the historical and cultural milieux in which the objects on display were created and used.

Another aspect of this form of museum education has less to do with the direct exchange of information than with how people perceive objects. Many people lack confidence in their own taste or ability to differentiate between objects of major and minor importance. While such scruples may have less to do with history than appreciation, the presence of another person to guide the visitor, exchange views and explain why one item is more significant than another is reassuring. Moreover, most children and a fair number of adults never read labels. To understand an illustration from a book of fables or a Persian poem without reading or hearing the story is only possible for those with prior knowledge of the narrative. Yet, a child or adult who is shown the dramatis personae and told what they are doing will probably remember the picture. Likewise, discussing

the artistic style of an object without explaining its context usually leads to a mass defection of the museum audience.

### **Electronic information**

In recent years a third means of communicating with the public about museum collections has become increasingly available in the form of interactive computer programs. Audiovisual displays have long been used to augment exhibitions, but they present the visitor with an opportunity to glean information passively. By contrast, interactive CD-ROMs allow visitors to choose the subjects that most interest them and delve into them more deeply. Whereas most galleries are arranged chronologically, the interactive computer program allows the visitor to focus on themes ranging from the social to the technological. Also, objects that are shown in different galleries in the museum can be brought together on the screen.

At the British Museum the development of a large-scale interactive computer program is well underway. It will include objects from all departments of the museum which will be organized in subject categories. The public will be able to search for information on individual objects as well as topics that cut across departmental lines. The computers on which visitors can access the Compass Program, as it is called, will be placed in the new Walter and Leonora Annenberg Centre, formerly the Round Reading Room of the British Library, in the heart of the British Museum building. Will these computers and their far-reaching programs lure visitors away from the objects on display? This is certainly not the museum's intention. Rather it is hoped that people will use the computer to

enhance or plan their visit and to acquire more information during their time in the museum than would have previously been possible. For younger visitors such an adjunct may take precedence over the actual exhibits, but it will still focus their attention on the collections and may encourage them to return to the museum.

The nature of education in museums differs markedly from that of the school or university. Museum visitors are free to ignore or partake of the range of information on offer without fear of failing a course or incurring a teacher's wrath. Although museum curators are obliged to provide as much accurate information as possible about the collections, members of the public are not compelled to read labels, listen to gallery talks, search for information on the computer, or even look at the objects on display. Yet, a finely installed showcase or a thoughtfully composed label can succeed in drawing the visitor literally into a gallery and figuratively into a culture or historical period. A curator who can spark off curiosity and invite the visitor to linger in a gallery to ponder over its exhibits is on the road to success. If the visitor goes home and reads up a bit on what has been seen and then returns for a lecture or another visit, the curator will have good reason to feel satisfied. Yet, the curator who learns that the vase or painting or textile carefully placed on display has inspired such artists as Henry Moore or Howard Hodgkin or Lucy Rhie or even a musician or a scientist can feel equally proud that the work has been a success. The great appeal of presenting exotic collections is not to inculcate audiences with one idea or way of viewing history or art, but to give the public as broad a range as possible of ways to enjoy, understand and respond to the works on exhibition. ■

# Islamic art in Berlin

Jens Kröger

*Berlin, long a major centre for Islamic art and study, is in the process of reuniting collections dispersed by war and politics. This unique challenge is described by Jens Kröger, curator at Berlin's Museum of Islamic Art and a specialist in the Sassanid art of Iran and Iraq, and early Islamic glass. He is the author of a number of publications including Sasanidischer Stuckdekor (Mainz, 1982) and Nishapur: Glass of the Early Islamic Period (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995).*

The reunification of Germany resulted in far-reaching changes for the State museums in Berlin. The Museum of Islamic Art is one of those collections that have already or will be united within one of the main museum centres in Berlin. As part of the archaeological collections, the Museum of Islamic Art will be situated within the Pergamonmuseum on the museum island in the centre of the city as has been the case since 1932. However, as will be shown in detail, due to the historic events in Germany, the Museum of Islamic Art has undergone numerous changes since the first exhibition in 1904 was inaugurated.

## **A first start in the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum (1904–32)**

It was due to the energy of Wilhelm von Bode, the leading figure within the Berlin museums at the turn of the century, that the new department of Islamic art within the Royal Museums in Berlin (Königliche

Museen zu Berlin) was set up. Himself a man of wide interests, he was well acquainted with Islamic carpets, which he collected for himself and for the Berlin museum prior to the existence of an Islamic collection. In the Department of European sculptures he used carpets within his Renaissance-period rooms.

Bode was informed of the existence of the monumental façade of the palace of Mshatta in the Jordanian desert by the Austrian art historian Josef Strzygowski. He immediately began negotiations for acquisition and asked for support from the German Emperor Wilhelm II. Due to his archaeological ambitions the Kaiser took a keen interest in the façade, which was then believed to have been built in the pre-Islamic period by the Persians. The façade was given as a personal present from the Ottoman Emperor Sultan Abdul Hamid to the German Emperor Wilhelm II. In 1903 it was taken to Berlin to be set up within the newly built Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum. Although the date of the Mshatta façade was still disputed it was placed within the new collection which thereafter was called the Persian-Islamic Department. Only later was an Umayyad date accepted, probably A.D. 743/44 at the end of the first Islamic dynasty. To enlarge the exhibition Bode asked Friedrich Sarre to loan his private collection of Islamic art. Sarre had rapidly acquired it on his journeys in the Near East as well as on the European art market and due to his scholarly research became the founder of the study of Islamic art and archaeology in Germany. He was also asked to head the department. Bode himself presented his own collection of thirty carpets from the classical period as a gift to the Königliche Museen. Further exhibits from other collections in the State museums were continually integrated into the museum.

*A photo of the painted room from a house in Aleppo, restored in 1960, as it was displayed in the Islamic Museum within the Pergamonmuseum in 1996.*





On the occasion of the opening of the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum on 18 October 1904 the façade of Mshatta was shown to the general public for the first time, and the acquisition of such a monumental work of architecture was a sensation in the international world of museums. It became obvious that it was one of the major architectural monuments of the Berlin State museums.

However, the presentation of the Mshatta façade was not considered totally acceptable, as it had to be installed within already existing rooms that did not fit its size. Thus it could not be shown in its original length, the rooms were too low and without light from the ceiling the relief could not be seen as well as in daylight. The difficulties of exhibiting such a monumental architectural work within a museum were obvious and have remained so ever since.

Sarre wrote on public reactions concerning the newly opened museum department: 'The small collection only found admiration and met approval among a limited number of art lovers in Berlin. The typical art historians or museum people remained indifferent or critical. The same is true about the press and the general public.'<sup>1</sup> It was only when Wilhelm von Bode himself became Director-General that he was able to install the new department officially in 1907.

A major event of the early years was the excavation from 1911 to 1913 at Samarra (Iraq). Friedrich Sarre and Ernst Herzfeld had selected the former ninth-century Abbasid capital as a place most suitable to learn more about early Islamic art and culture. Stucco wall panels from the palaces and houses in Samarra had been taken to Berlin and were presented within the exhibition as one of the results of the

excavations. Aside from objects of various materials such as stone, woodwork and ceramics, architectural elements gave the galleries in Berlin a very typical character.

The Islamic galleries in the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum had always been seen as an intermediate stage. About this Sarre wrote: 'One of Bode's plans was to concentrate all Asian art of the Berlin museums in one spot. For this purpose the architect Bruno Paul was asked to plan an Asiatic Museum in the suburb of Dahlem.'<sup>2</sup> Within the new building the Mshatta façade would have been given a prominent place, however due to the First World War and strong opposition from Carl Heinrich Becker, Islamicist and Prussian Minister of Culture from 1925 to 1930, who saw Islamic art as a part of the arts in the classical tradition, these plans were never realized.

A major point during the 1920s remained the discussion about a different location within the museum island. One of these plans was to erect a new wing; however it was eventually dropped because the Mshatta façade needed a space 35 metres long to be displayed properly.

The decision to place the new Islamic gallery on the second floor of the south wing of the Pergamonmuseum had been taken in 1929. The provisional set-up of the Mshatta façade in the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum thus lasted for nearly thirty years, from 1904 until 1932. During these years the Islamic collection had grown considerably and included art of a very different nature. It thus was an archaeological collection as well as a collection of applied arts of the Islamic world from Spain to India during the seventh to nineteenth centuries. Masterpieces included metalwork, pottery and glass objects, miniatures and carpets. However, considerable care had been taken to build a systematic

collection that included masterpieces as well as dated objects and archaeological material. Because the museum was the only specialized collection of Islamic art in Germany it did not see its role as solely exhibiting art but also as a centre for Islamic art studies.

### **The Pergamonmuseum (1932–45)**

On 17 December 1932 the new galleries were opened in the Pergamonmuseum on the second floor of the south wing above the galleries of the Ancient Near Eastern Department. The department was now called Islamische Kunstabteilung (Department of Islamic Art) and Ernst Kühnel had become head of the collection. The exhibition was arranged in chronological order within a group of eighteen rooms. The results of the excavations in Ctesiphon and Samarra were presented in rooms with windows that provided a favourable light for the ornamental wall panels. The Mshatta façade, though not placed within the chronological order, was displayed nearly in its entirety in a large hall 33 metres long with overhead lighting. This was a much improved situation. A second set of rooms, with natural light coming through a glass ceiling, was high enough for the large Persian and Ottoman carpets, for which the collection was internationally known. Ceramics and metalwork were displayed in cases and carpets placed both on the wall and on the floor.

The new galleries of the museum were meant as permanent exhibition rooms; however because of the war the museum was closed on 1 September 1939 less than eight years after its opening. The objects had to be taken from the galleries or were protected within them. On 3 February 1945 the left tower of the Mshatta façade

was hit by a bomb and shattered into many pieces. On 10/11 March 1945 a bomb struck the safe within the mint (Reichsmünze), destroying the most important carpets of the famous collection. Most of the moveable objects that had not been taken to safety in salt mines or secured secretly within the museum compound were deported by a Soviet commando early in 1946.

### **A divided collection in a divided city (1945–89)**

As a result of the division of Germany and Berlin the collection of the Islamic Department was also divided into two parts with two separate galleries within the divided city. In East Berlin the new exhibition was opened in 1954 in the restored south wing of the Pergamonmuseum which had formerly housed the complete collection. In 1958 the objects taken in 1946 were returned from the Soviet Union and a more extensive exhibition was thus opened in 1959. In West Berlin a new Islamic gallery was opened in Dahlem in 1954 with the objects that had been returned from central collecting points in West Germany. Both exhibitions in east and west were inaugurated by Ernst Kühnel, who had already retired in 1951. The Dahlem exhibition, which was planned as temporary, remained until the summer of 1967. In 1962 the works of art from the former Prussian museums in West Berlin became part of a newly founded Prussian Heritage Foundation (Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz).

In the west Kurt Erdmann became head of the museum in 1958 and was asked to make plans for a new museum in a building to be erected in Dahlem but he died before the plans could be realized. Klaus Brisch was called as the new head



© Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Museum für Islamische Kunst

of the department and under his tenure the museum was given the name of Museum für Islamische Kunst. The new permanent galleries in Dahlem were inaugurated in 1971 within the complex of the Museum for Asiatic Art.

A considerable number of new acquisitions greatly enlarged the collection in the western part of the museum from 1954 until 1992. The main aim was to build a systematic collection of Islamic art through the centuries. As all large architectural works of art remained in the eastern half of the collection and reunification of Germany did not seem likely at that time, it would be necessary to add such works of prime importance to the collection in the west. In 1978 the acquisition of a wooden cupola ceiling dating from the thirteenth or fourteenth century from the Torre de las Damas within the Alhambra complex in Granada, Spain, which had long been in a German private collection, was one of the major acquisitions in that sense.

In the eastern half of the city, in 1978,

Volkmar Enderlein was appointed head of the Islamic Museum, as it had been renamed in the 1950s. A member of the museum staff since 1959, he was responsible for numerous exhibitions and restorations of major monuments. Among them were the famous wooden painted panels belonging to the main room of a house in Aleppo, Syria, which had previously been acquired in 1912. In 1960 the room was arranged according to the original plan.

#### **The museum in a changing world (1989–2000)**

In West Berlin Michael Meinecke succeeded Klaus Brisch in 1988. It was during his tenure and that of Volkmar Enderlein in East Berlin that the reunification of Germany took place. On 1 January 1992 the administrative unification of the two parts of the State museums was undertaken. The name Islamisches Museum was dropped in favour of the name Museum für Islamische Kunst and Michael

*A 1909 photograph of the Islamic Department in the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum (1904–32).*



*The Mshatta façade in the Pergamonmuseum after 1932.*

Meinecke became the director with Volkmar Enderlein as deputy. It was decided that the unified museum would find its place within the Pergamonmuseum where the Mshatta façade was exhibited. This meant that in Dahlem the gallery, the study gallery, the textile and carpet restoration department, and the administration, including the library of the museum, would have to move to the Pergamonmuseum. Plans for the future galleries of the united museum were made. Upon Michael Meinecke's untimely death in 1995, Volkmar Enderlein succeeded him. Since it was impossible to have two exhibitions of Islamic art which formerly belonged to one collection within the city of Berlin, the Dahlem gallery was closed on 3 May 1998.

Until the future galleries for the museum can be realized, an intermediate exhibition is planned for the existing gallery in the Pergamonmuseum. Masterpieces of both collections will be shown within this gallery which once housed the complete collection.

Due to the reunification of the archaeological collections of the State museums on the museum island, the Museum of Islamic Art plans to move from its present location in the south wing to the north wing of the Pergamonmuseum. This will make it possible to present the Mshatta façade in nearly its full length on the ground floor. It will be a solution that comes closer to the original situation although much effort will be needed to find a lighting system that will enable the relief of the stonework to stand out as clearly as it does when lit by top light through a glass ceiling. The foremost goal of this solution is to enable as many visitors as possible to see this monument, which they will now be able to do after having passed the highlights of the Egyptian and the Ancient Near Eastern departments and the monuments of classical antiquity. Visitors with more time for Islamic art may follow a chronological path with works of art of the early Islamic period on the ground floor while the later periods up to the nineteenth century will be shown on the second floor. This solution gives the Museum of Islamic Art more space and thus the chance to show the extensive collection of works of art from the Islamic world which has been assembled for this purpose since 1904. ■

#### Notes

1. F. Sarre, 'Die Islamische Kunstabteilung in Berlin. I: Die Entstehung', *Kunst und Künstler*, 32, 1933, p. 43.
2. F. Sarre, 'Wilhelm v. Bode und die Islamische Kunstabteilung', *Der Kunstwanderer*, 1929, pp. 343–5.

# Preserving a treasure: the Sana'a manuscripts

Ursula Dreibholz

*The extraordinary find in Yemen of ancient parchment and paper fragments, mainly from the earliest Islamic periods, posed a unique set of problems covering all aspects of museum practice, from conservation and restoration to storage and access. How to exhibit these newly discovered materials in a country with few museum traditions was the challenge facing Ursula Dreibholz, a conservation expert who worked on the project for eight years. She recounts how the use of simple, often locally available materials coupled with a great deal of ingenuity and resourcefulness came to the rescue of a collection of inestimable historic importance.*

The House of Manuscripts, called the Dar al-Makhtutat in Arabic, was built in 1980 on a site alongside the Great Mosque in the Old City of Sana'a in order to accommodate newly acquired manuscripts and to be, at the same time, in close proximity to the mosque library, facilitating the transfer of manuscripts between the two libraries for microfilming and conservation purposes. UNESCO subsequently provided wooden storage cabinets for the manuscripts, and there are rooms with microfilm readers for studying.

After a hidden cache of very old Koranic manuscript fragments had been discovered between the ceiling and the roof of the Great Mosque in 1972 when heavy rains had caused the west wall of the mosque to collapse, they were then stored in potato bags in the basement of the National Museum for many years until a project, funded by the German Government working in conjunction with the Yemeni Department for Antiquities, Museums and Manuscripts, was finally established in 1980 to preserve, properly store, catalogue and microfilm this priceless cultural heritage.<sup>1</sup> Conservation and photographic facilities as well as a photographic laboratory were built in the Dar al-Makhtutat, and an exhibition room for showing a selection of parchment manuscript leaves was created. (The parchment manuscripts, being older than those of paper, were considered more important and were given priority. Unfortunately, there was not enough time during the course of the project to attend to the paper fragments as well.)

A large hall on the ground floor of the Dar al-Makhtutat was allocated for displaying the selected manuscript fragments. The installation had to be made with limited funds and in a very short time (two

weeks) to be ready for a conference of ministers from Islamic states held in 1984. It has not been changed since then.

The basic and very simple idea was to have oblong, supporting frameworks made up of welded hollow, square iron bars. Such structures are strong but small and light enough to be easily handled and, furthermore, impart a weightless and airy feeling to the whole display. Heavy wooden boards were laid on top of these frames to form the base for the actual supports of the manuscript leaves; these supports were also made up of wooden boards, joined together two at a time lengthways by metal hinges. They were fixed upright on to the base and spread apart at the bottom, so as to form a triangle with the supporting board and prevented from slipping over the edges by small wooden posts. The boards were covered with dark red velvet, a locally available fabric, and the manuscript leaves were prevented from sliding on the sloping surface by the weight of 5-mm-thick glass plates securely held in place by small pieces of wood screwed on to the boards at the lower two corners and in the centre of the top edge, allowing enough air to circulate through the unsealed edges. (Parchment, which is animal skin, needs to 'breathe' and should never be completely sealed off.) Since the leaves have to be shown in their entirety and sometimes have very irregular shapes due to prior deterioration, masking them with mats is not desirable. So, holding them down with glass plates is the simplest and safest method.

So far, the exhibition is not open to the general public, but arrangements for a visit are possible. To protect the fragile inks and colours the manuscripts are kept permanently in the dark, light only being allowed for short viewings. Curtains, made



*Dar al-Makbtutat Library where the newly acquired manuscripts and cataloguing are stored. The wooden storage cabinets were donated by UNESCO.*

of double layers of heavy denim, cover the windows completely and the exposed pages are further shielded from light by cardboard covers placed over the glass plates – a not very elegant but certainly very effective device which can be easily removed and replaced just as quickly. Of course, ultraviolet filtering plastic covers or coatings on the glass plates or the windows, and slips over the fluorescent lights would be advisable, but so far this expense has not been met. On the other hand, these protective devices do not last for ever and in a country that can ill afford to have guaranteed resources for the replacement of expensive foreign materials this was the most realistic solution, not to mention that once the protective shield had disappeared unnoticed the manuscripts would be in even greater danger of deterioration. Modern technology can undoubtedly be very useful, but it also can lull people into a false sense of security. I strongly believe that under certain circumstances the simpler and more visible media are not only cheaper and more practical, but also more efficient in the long run. And this is, after all, what we should aim for.

### Storing the fragments

A brief mention of the classification methods and the system of signatures for the Koran fragments is necessary because this is pertinent to the organization of the storage. (There are approximately 15,000 parchment fragments from nearly 1,000 different volumes of the Koran, which are all incomplete.) After conservation treatment (mainly humidifying, cleaning and flattening the parchment; there was no time for cosmetic measures, except for repairing the biggest tears), the textual content of the leaves was determined by Yemeni colleagues, and the numbers for the appropriate sura (chapter) and aya (verse) were written in soft pencil at the beginning and end of each page and even on much smaller fragments. This was an important requirement for the next step, which was the allotment of the leaves to their appropriate places.

The signatures of the different volumes consist of three numbers which also represent the main criteria of classification: (a) the number of lines on the page; (b) the maximum length of the lines in centimetres; and (c) how many different volumes with these same criteria already exist. For example, '7-11' means that there are seven lines to the page and they are not longer than 11 cm. Of course, there may be several Korans with these same criteria, distinguished from each other by different script, decoration, format, etc. For each of these an individual number is added at the end of the signature (i.e. 7-11.1, 7-11.2, etc.). An inconsistent number of lines within a volume is designated by the number '01', followed by the length of the lines. Where the number of lines or their length cannot be established, '00' is used.

I was the conservator for the project for eight years but during the last years it was

my greatest concern to create a safe and reliable permanent storage system for the restored fragments. Safety for the objects, easy handling, and quick information retrieval were my most important guidelines. Also, I had to use the material that had been shipped from Germany for this purpose long before.

Single or few leaves of a volume of the Koran are stored in flat folders but because of the rather uncertain quality of the material I lined these folders with thin, acid-free board. This board protrudes just slightly from under the top cover of the folder to enable the cover to be lifted with only one grip (saving considerable time when having to look into hundreds of folders in search of matching fragments). A sheet of clear and chemically neutral plastic ('Melinex' or 'Mylar') is attached to the front edge of the lining and folded back over the parchments so they are protected and can easily be seen at the same time. They are prevented from falling out by the side-flaps of the folders, which can simply be lifted, together with the plastic sheet, should closer examination of the fragments be necessary. About twenty to thirty of these folders fit into open-ended plastic boxes. Since Islamic manuscripts were traditionally stored horizontally and not upright as in Europe, and the fragments are much too fragile to be stored any other way than flat, the boxes with the folders are laid with their broad sides on the shelves, the opening pointing forwards so that all the labels face the viewer and the folders can be taken out effortlessly. The handy size of these boxes (32 × 22 × 10 cm) also considerably facilitates handling.

The thicker (but still incomplete) volumes are stored in custom-made drop-open boxes covered with strong bookbinder's linen on the outside and lined with heavy



© Photo by courtesy of the author

paper on the inside. Care was taken to position the labels with the signatures so that they are not touched or rubbed when the box is handled but are still prominently visible. The parchment leaves are too weak and fragmented to be re-sewn, which would not in any case make much sense since there is always the possibility of other leaves emerging from the rest of the still unrestored or unclassified material. The bookblock with the often very fragile edges is protected by a wrapper of thin acid-free board, but again the top cover is clear plastic. Since parchment tends to warp and curl, and because it 'remembers' the original three-dimensional shape of the animal, it always has to be held under slight pressure. In European manuscripts this was done with heavy wooden boards that were fastened with clasps. In early Islamic bindings the boards were also of wood and fastened with pegs and leather thongs. Therefore, the fragments, with the wrapper, are placed between two boards made of heavy card, covered with the same paper used for lining the inside of the box, and tied together with linen bands that allow

*Some of the Koranic parchment fragments in the condition in which they were found.*



*The ground-floor hall where selected manuscript fragments are exhibited on specially crafted supporting frameworks.*

the thickness of this assemblage to stay flexible, so additional leaves, when found later, may be inserted. Since it is of great importance to look through many folders and boxes quickly when trying to place a new fragment I had the idea of cutting a little 'window' into the upper board, so the first page of the volume could be seen. Thus, just by opening the box, and without having to untie the bands every time, one can see the script at a glance and judge whether a new fragment may belong to this group. I also found it very important to mark all parts of this assemblage with the signature, i.e. on the outside and inside of the box, on the board with the window, and on the wrapper around the leaves. In this way there is a greater chance that the parts that belong together will also stay together.

Very deteriorated fragments, especially those of a larger format, are put into individual Mylar envelopes and the right and lower edges are point-sealed with an ultrasonic welder. This allows their being handled without endangering them. Air flow is guaranteed because the point-seals

are spaced far apart (3–5 cm) and the other two sides left open so that the fragment may be removed if needed.

There is a folder for every signature, meaning for every single leaf or group of fragments that originally belonged to a volume of the Koran, and the labels are colour-coded with different colours for objects either too big or too bulky to fit into the ordinary folders. In this way one can tell immediately where the fragments may be found. In addition, the labels are placed on the folders in a step-like fashion so that any error in filing a folder can immediately be recognized, because the label would be in the wrong position.

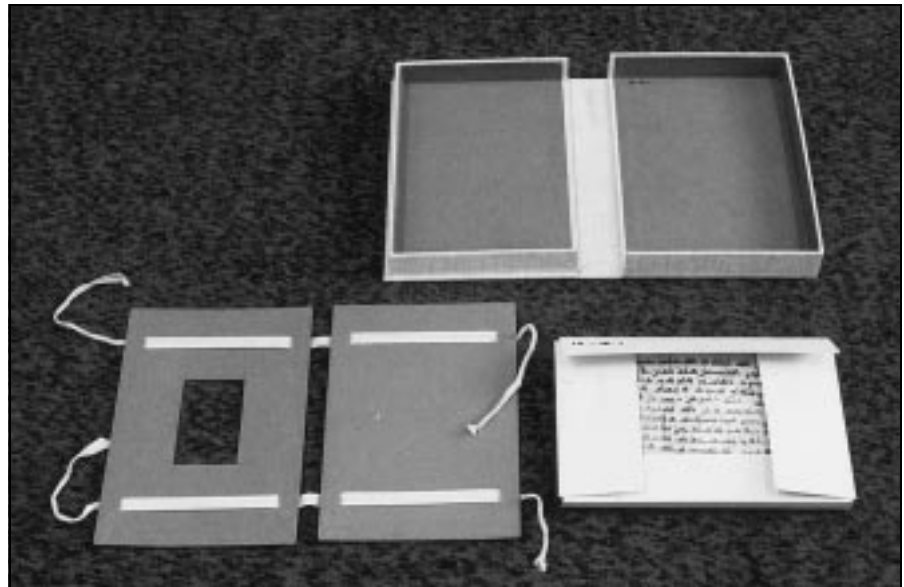
Special metal cabinets were built to house the manuscripts. A long-standing discussion had been going on to determine whether metal or wooden cabinets were safer in case of a fire. Quite convincing reports have been made that show that heavy wooden cabinets could withstand fire better than metal ones. It seems that metal will bend and eventually melt and transmit the heat to the books in the interior, whereas solid wood might not ignite so easily, does not bend and can also insulate the books from the heat. Nevertheless, in our case it was simply a question of cost that dictated the use of metal cabinets.

The Dar al-Makhtutat does not have air-conditioning which, in my opinion, is no great loss because it is not really necessary here. The climate in Sana'a, at an altitude of about 2,400 metres, is generally very agreeable, not too hot and not too cold, though it tends to be rather dry. The manuscripts have already survived under these conditions for 1,000 years. They are slightly dried out, but the main damage was not caused by climatic conditions but rather by poor storage, insects and water.



As I have already explained, technology can be a blessing or a curse. In none of the museums where I worked in the United States did the air-conditioning function satisfactorily, and one can hardly imagine a country with a higher developed technology. The newer the museum, the more problems there were with the equally new air-conditioning system. In a country like Yemen, with restricted funds, unstable electricity and frequent power cuts, such a high-tech system would be asking for trouble. It has been shown that frequent and strong fluctuations in temperature and relative humidity are much more damaging to objects than comparatively steady conditions, even if they are quite far from ideal. Therefore, the tremendous cost of installing and maintaining such a system could prove rather counterproductive.

But a real problem is the lack of a fire-prevention or -detection system. In view of the truly catastrophic fires that have destroyed important libraries around the world throughout history, this is a very grave omission. The Department of Antiquities does not have the means to install such systems and donor money has dried up in recent years. My role has been to assist in preserving the Koran manuscripts and to provide a reasonably safe environment for their future. I can only hope that wisdom and good fortune will prevail and that the cultural treasures housed in the Dar al-Makhtutat will be saved for posterity.<sup>2</sup> ■



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#### Notes

1. See Abdelaziz Abid, "Memory of the World": Preserving Our Documentary Heritage', *Museum International*, No. 193 (Vol. 49, No. 1, 1997) – Ed.

2. For those interested in learning more about the importance of the find, the project and the conservation treatment, please refer to the following publications: Ursula Dreibholz, 'Der Fund von Sanaa. Frühislamische Handschriften auf Pergament', *Pergament. Geschichte–Struktur–Herstellung*, pp. 229–313, illus. (in German), Sigmaringen, Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 1991; Ursula Dreibholz, 'The Treatment of Early Islamic Manuscript Fragments on Parchment', *The Conservation and Preservation of Islamic Manuscripts*, pp. 131–45, illus., London, Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation, 1996.

*A 'drop-open' manuscript box: fragments in wrapper, cover boards with 'windows' and linen tapes.*

# Fourteen centuries of Islamic culture: the Iranian Islamic Period Museum

Zobreh Roohfar

*Zobreh Roohfar, curator of Islamic art and head of the Islamic Period Museum in Tebran, describes the exhibition themes and methods used to display Islamic art in an Islamic context, for a public familiar with the historical and cultural background of the objects. The author, a professional archaeologist, has published a number of works on Islamic textiles and astrological themes and has been guest lecturer in several museums, including the British Museum. She was responsible for reorganizing the collection of the Bastan Museum comprising more than 10,000 objects and transforming it into the new Iranian Islamic Period Museum.*

Given the particular significance of the rich Islamic culture and civilization in Iran, the necessity of creating an independent and comprehensive museum to display its art and artefacts was clearly felt, and ample planning was made in this direction over several years. Eventually, from 1993 onward, tangible and extensive efforts were undertaken by three entities to achieve this goal.

The Islamic section of the Iranian National Museum took charge of the selection, expertization, presentation and classification of artefacts alongside the preliminary work of preparing two catalogues for the new museum.

The Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization's Restoration and Conservation Research Centre handled the transfer of such voluminous items as prayer niches and the like from the second floor of the (old) Iranian National Museum to the new Islamic Period Museum. During this phase, experts took great pains to preserve earlier restoration work and to install the objects so as to exhibit them just as they were set in their original buildings. For example, if a prayer niche was originally located 50 cm above the floor of the mosque to which it belonged, this disposition was respected. Of course, such work was carried out with the help of the Islamic Department's experts and their historic studies of the buildings concerned. Care was taken to install voluminous items so that they could be easily relocated whenever needed in the future.

The design and execution of the museum's interior architecture was completed by skilled architects and visitor information was prepared by expert graphic designers. Thus, thanks to the co-operation of these three groups, the Iranian Islamic Period Museum, in which

a sophisticated presentation has been realized, was inaugurated on 22 October 1996.

The museum building follows the style of four-vaulted Sassanid monuments and covers a built area of 4,000 m<sup>2</sup> laid out on three floors. The first floor houses an auditorium and temporary exhibition galleries. On the second floor, the items are thematically organized in chronological order. The architectural decorative items exhibited on the third floor are laid out according to historical periods. The items exhibited in this large museum cover fourteen centuries of Islamic civilization and culture, and mostly constitute a selection of objects retrieved during scientific excavations effected on such sites as Nayshabur, Rey, Gorgan and Shush (Susa), or transferred from valuable collections such as that of the mausoleum of Sheikh Safi od-Din Ardabili.

## **A treasury of manuscripts**

The focal point of the museum is a square area where a treasury of Koranic manuscripts is displayed. A fifth-century A.H. wooden window on which the Unity sura is carved and a wooden door incised with verses from the Holy Koran and set on a wall notify visitors that they are entering an entirely spiritual area whose holy atmosphere is complemented by a stone prayer niche dating back to the eleventh century A.H., a superb prayer rug and the heart-warming incantation of verses from the Holy Koran.

The manuscripts range from the third to the fourteenth century A.H., the most ancient specimens being written on deerskin and in *kufic* script. As we know, the first Koranic manuscripts were written in *kufic* script and Soltan-<sup>c</sup>Ali Mashhadi has recorded:

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The *kufic* script is a divine sign among divine signs and a miracle among miracles, and Korans written by His Holiness, the King of Believers, Imam <sup>ʿ</sup>Ali (pbuh) existed which were models of handsome writing, sobriety, perfect composition and masterly balance of words, and although Imam <sup>ʿ</sup>Ali (pbuh) did not invent the *kufic* script, he knowledgeably altered it, and it is said that he also taught the *kufic* script to 316 calligraphers.<sup>1</sup>

The collection also includes a Koranic manuscript which bears the adjunct signature of Imam <sup>ʿ</sup>Ali (pbuh). Some believe that deerskin was used because no paper existed at the time, but the first paper mill was created in Baghdad between A.H. 147 and 194 (A.D. 764/65 and 809/10) by Fazl ebn-e Yahya, the Iranian minister of the <sup>ʿ</sup>Abbasid court, and the paper it produced was exported to other Islamic countries as well. Therefore, it was perhaps owing to the solidity of deerskin that it was used for the Koranic manuscripts.

From the fourth century A.D. onward, after the invention of the Six Pens by Ebn-e Moqle, Koranic manuscripts were written in *thuluth*, *naskh*, *mubaqqaq*, *raihan*, *tauqiʿ* and *reqaʿ* scripts, and *kufic* was

used in writing sura headings. Superb Koranic manuscripts in these scripts bearing the signatures of such artists as Yaqut Mosta<sup>ʿ</sup>semi, <sup>ʿ</sup>Emad-at-Tavusi, Ahmad Sohrevardi, Pir Mohammad Thani, Ahmad Nayrizi and Zia<sup>ʿ</sup> os-Saltane and displaying exquisite covers and illuminations shine in this museum.

In the area surrounding the Koran Treasury, scientific, literary and historical manuscripts such as *Masalek va-mamalek*, *ʿAjayeb ol-makbluqat*, *Zakbire-ye Kharazmsbahi*, Hafez's *Divan*, the *Shab-name*, the *Masnavi-ye Ma<sup>ʿ</sup>navi*, Sa<sup>ʿ</sup>di's *Qasayed*, *Rouzat os-safa'*, Hafez-e Abru's *History*, etc., are exhibited with due care for their thematic and chronological sequence. The oldest among these manuscripts is the *Al-Khalas* grammar, dated A.H. 557 (A.D. 1161/62). In addition to the importance of the subject matter, all the arts of the book, including cover-making and -binding, illumination, calligraphy and occasionally illustration may also be admired.

On the walls surrounding the central area, valuable calligraphic works and miniature paintings encircle the manuscripts on display. Calligraphy enjoys a highly revered status among Islamic arts and is considered a sacred art that has taken shape at the hands of artists. It may be

*The focal point of the museum is a square area where third- to fourteenth-century Koranic manuscripts are displayed.*



*The gallery of astronomical instruments includes objects dating as far back as A.H. 558 (A.D. 1162/63).*

said that, from the earliest days of the Islamic era, the concepts embodied in the Holy Koran were materialized in the form of splendid scriptures and that calligraphy was indeed rooted in the Islamic religion. Immortal works of such exalted calligraphers as Mir-<sup>ᶜ</sup>Emad, <sup>ᶜ</sup>Abd-ol-Majid, Mohammad Hosein, Mohammad Saleh and Mirza Kuchak Vesal are exhibited here, as well as unsigned specimens such as the page on which the words '*Hova-l-Fattah al-<sup>ᶜ</sup>Azim*' are inscribed with such laudable humility that the artist has deemed it superfluous to sign his name.

Miniature paintings belonging to the Herat, Shiraz, Indian and Moghol and Esfahan schools are displayed in this section, each representing a high point in the evolution of painting schools in the course of the history of Islamic arts. Among these, the peak of the Herat school and its transplantation into India, which soon underwent alterations and became known as the Indian, Moghol or Indo-Iranian school, can be admired throughout its evolution.

### Everyday objects as works of art

At the four corners of this area, objects such as lighting devices, astronomical instruments, glassware, medical instruments and writing utensils are exhibited in separate sections.

The collection of lighting devices demonstrates the evolution of these instruments from the earliest Islamic years to the end of the Safavid period. It includes simple or footed unglazed ceramic tallow lamps as well as stone tallow lamps dating back to the third and fourth centuries A.H. In the fifth and sixth centuries A.H. we witness more sophisticated variants of ceramic tallow lamps and the decoration of footed bronze lamps. Handsome glass pendants with appended adornments may be admired here. The diversity of Safavid-period incised brass candlesticks and copper and silver pendants is also shown.

Among the astronomical instruments are astrolabes ranging from the sixth century A.H. to the end of the Qajar period. The most ancient astrolabe of this collection dates back to A.H. 558 (A.D. 1162/63) and was made by Mohammad ebn-e Hamed Esfahani. In exhibiting flat astrolabes, the educational aspect of the display has been taken into consideration and the various parts of the instruments are separately introduced. A flat astrolabe made by <sup>ᶜ</sup>Abd ol-<sup>ᶜ</sup>Ali Mohammad Rafi<sup>ᶜ</sup> al-Jerbi in A.H. 1247 (A.D. 1831/32) and another made by Khalil ebn-e Hosein-<sup>ᶜ</sup>Ali Mohammad are also exhibited. This collection includes a brass globe bearing the twelve months of the year separated by meridians on its equator, which was made in A.H. 535 (A.D. 1140/41). Another astronomical item on display is an eighth-century A.H. copy of <sup>ᶜ</sup>Abdorrahman Sufi Razi's book of constellations. Sufi Razi was a renowned fourth-century A.H. astronomer and a

contemporary of the Dailamite monarch ʿAzod-ad-Dowleh, who was also an observer of the stars.

In the section of glassware and medical instruments the height of early Islamic glassmaking art may be contemplated. The most important glassmaking centres of the time were Rayy, Shush, Gorgan and Nishapur. After the Moghol invasion, a large number of Iranian glassmakers emigrated to other Islamic countries and thereafter this art declined in Iran, though a number of glass items from the Safavid period are extant. In the Qajar period, thanks to the efforts of Amir Kabir, glassmaking workshops were set up in the country, but these attempts were unsuccessful. Among the glass items are medical laboratory instruments, including blood-letting implements and experimental tubes dating back to the early Islamic period.

The sacred art of writing and its related instruments, as well as their use and care, have received particular attention in a section of this vast treasury devoted to the Holy Koran and penmanship. In this collection, a number of stone, glass and metal inkpots from various Islamic periods are exhibited, along with a bronze pen-case containing an inkpot and other writing instruments and exquisite silver- and gold-beaten pen-cases from the Seljuk period. This section also includes several lacquered pen-cases and boxes for writing tools crafted by such talented Safavid and Qajar period artists as Aqa-Najaf, Mohammad Zaman, Fathollah and Mohammad Esmaʿil.

On the second floor, alongside the central area and four peripheral booths, three main galleries are dedicated to ceramics, metalwork and textiles (carpets and fabrics). In the ceramics gallery the

evolution of ceramic art from the earliest Islamic centuries until the end of the Qajar period is shown. On display are such various techniques as moulded patterns, monochrome glazing, sprayed glaze and painting over the slip under transparent glaze, often accompanied with *kufic* inscriptions, mostly belonging to the third and fourth centuries A.H. These artefacts were made in such Iranian ceramic manufacturing centres as Nishapur, Shush, Estakhr and Rayy. The summit of ceramic art may be admired in the Seljuk period, when *mina'i* (overglaze painting) and lustreware items were crafted at Rayy, Kashan and Gorgan. Their decorative themes and motifs mostly comprise Iranian epic and romantic stories and are often accompanied by poems. Artefacts dating back to the eighth century A.H. consist mainly of superb gilded and underglaze painted items made at Soltanabad and Kashan. The evolution of ceramic art is visible on *kubachi* blue and white vessels produced in the eighth and ninth centuries A.H.

The objects exhibited in the vast metalwork gallery show the diversity of techniques used over time. Here, a collection of fourth-century A.H. silver vessels from Azerbaijan includes nielloed bowls, flower vases and a tray bearing the inscription '*Barakat le-Amir Abe-l-ʿAbbas va-laken ebn-e Harun*'. The development of silver- and gold-beating techniques on bronze in the course of the sixth and seventh centuries A.H. can be followed on a variety of items made at Hamadan. Various types of inscribed brass candlesticks, which mostly incorporate Persian poems and belong to the Safavid period, are also impressive. A collection of thirteenth-century A.H. gold-beaten steel items made by Hajji ʿAbbas Esfahani and bearing Persian and Arabic inscriptions are included among them.



The gallery dedicated to the seventh and eighth centuries A.H. features Il-Khanid period architectural work in the form of two prayer niches.

In the textiles gallery the most ancient fabric is a fragment of two-sided silk cloth unearthed during excavations in Rayy and dating back to the early Islamic period. The continuation of Sassanid styles, techniques and decorative patterns is conspicuous on this specimen. The persistence of this weaving technique, albeit with different motifs and *kufic* inscriptions reading 'Man kaburat himmatub kathurat qimatub' and 'Man taba aslub zaka fe<sup>l</sup>lub', is visible on a silk cloth dating back to the fourth century A.H. Also present is a unique specimen of Seljuk-period silk fabric in which the *rang-o-nim-rang* (literally, tone and half-tone) technique has been used. The diversity of weaving techniques and patterns can be admired in Safavid-period fabrics and in a variety of brocades (*dara'i*, *atlas*, etc.), velvets, inscribed silk cloths and various stitch-works (*golabetun-duzi*, *dab-yek-duzi*, *pile-duzi*, *ajide-duzi*, etc.). In this section, a unique brocade specimen represents and attests to the combination of different arts in the Esfahan school under the Safavid Shah <sup>c</sup>Abbas I. This

brocade was woven by Mo<sup>c</sup>in Mossavver, the famous painter of the Esfahan school and a pupil of Reza <sup>c</sup>Abbasi. A variety of rugs of *mebrabi* (prayer niche), garden, medallion and quarter-medallions and Polish designs adorn the walls of this gallery. Among these, a rug woven at Tabriz in the tenth century A.H. uses three design types in the nomenclature of carpets (garden, prayer niche, and medallion and quarter-medallions). Thus, its intermediary border bears Persian poems, its central medallion represents birds swimming in a blue pool, surrounded by tree branches upon which birds are perched.

### A historical approach

On the third floor of the museum, various Islamic artefacts are displayed with an emphasis on architectural decorative elements. They are arranged in chronological order, from the early Islamic centuries up until the thirteenth century A.H., thus enabling the visitor to see how specific political, economic and social conditions helped shape artistic development. In this context the coins minted in each of these periods, which are exhibited with references to their caliphs, or kings, as well as to where they were minted, constitute the most important historical documents depicting the ups and downs and the political situation in the course of the centuries. Stucco carvings from monuments at Rayy and Nishapur are also found on this floor, as well as the most ancient Islamic-period fresco in Iran, which dates back to the third century A.H. and comes from the Sabzpushan Palace in Nishapur.

In the gallery dedicated to the fifth and sixth centuries A.H., a superb prayer niche and two carved stucco panels from Buzun (near Esfahan), as well as decorative brick

panels from the Nezamiye Madrase of Khargerd, may be admired. These are surrounded by *mina'i* and lustreware ceramic vessels made in the famous manufacturing centres of Rayy and Kashan, and the most ancient inscribed glazed tiles crafted in the Islamic period, which bear the words '*el-Malek*' and '*Mohammad*' and date from the fifth century A.H.

In the gallery dedicated to the seventh and eighth centuries A.H. the imposing majesty of Il-Khanid period architectural decoration can be admired in the form of two prayer niches. One is of carved stucco from Oshtorjan (near Esfahan) made by Mas'ud Kermani in A.H. 708 (A.D. 1308/09) and the other is a lustreware tile prayer niche famous as the Gate of Paradise and made by Yusef ebn-e 'Ali ebn-e Mohammad ebn-e Abi Taher. Various inscribed lustreware and gilded tiles are exhibited here alongside gilded ceramic vessels and silver- and gold-beaten metal artefacts. A superb Koranic manuscript in *mubaqqaq* script bearing the signatures of Ahmad Sohrawardi and 'Emad al-Mahallati also adorns this gallery.

The peak of perfection achieved by several arts in the Safavid period, including miniature paintings following the Indian, Moghol and Esfahan schools, handsome underglaze lacquered paintings on pen-cases, mirror frames and boxes for stationery tools, and incised brass artefacts – mostly adorned with Persian inscriptions – as well as various gold-thread rugs and fabrics, may be admired in the section dedicated to the tenth and eleventh centuries A.H. A tessellated tile prayer niche made at Mashhad adds to the majesty of this gallery. A highly interesting work of art belonging to this period is a piece of fabric decorated in the brush-painted *qalamkar* manner and bearing Koranic verses in *kufic*, *naskh*, *thuluth* and *gobar* scripts

with indigo, vermilion and golden inks. It was woven during the reign of Shah Tahmasp by Yusef al-Ghobari. (Brush-painted *qalamkar* fabrics were produced by impregnating the cloth with starch so as to allow ink and paint to adhere to its surface.) At the centre of this gallery are a number of artefacts from the Chini-khanel of Ardebil, including frames, flower vases, jars, ewers and bowls, all of which bear the seal of Shah 'Abbas. The continuation of Safavid arts in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries A.H. can be seen in the development of marquetry, mirror-work on wood, superb gold-beaten steel items and enamelled silverware.

The Iranian Islamic Period Museum possesses all the required educational attributes in terms of design and presentation. The information provided with every item is comprehensive and the artefacts bearing inscriptions are described together with their texts and script types. At the entrance to all the galleries, extensive data concerning the political and economic situation of the period concerned and its outstanding arts and artistic centres are supplied, providing visitors with a general knowledge and giving them a foretaste of the items they are about to see. The museum also has two catalogues, one presenting the Koranic manuscripts in its custody and the second introducing other Islamic arts with an emphasis on outstanding artefacts in each field. A more extensive introduction to the museum is provided in the form of slides and post-cards depicting a selection of its treasures. ■

#### Note

1. 'Abd ol-Mohammad-Khan Irani (Mo'addeb os-Soltan), *Peidayesh-e kbatt va kbattatan*, p. 52, Tehran, Ebn-e Sina, 1346/1967.

# Living the past: the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art

Nazan Ölcer

*The Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art in Istanbul exemplifies 'the process of reciprocal influence and the universality of art' through a thoughtful combination of Ottoman and Islamic art, as well as the folk art and folk life that, in Nazan Ölcer's words, 'are the natural extension of the fine arts and at the same time their roots'. The author became director of the museum in 1978 after having been chief of the carpets and kilims and metalwork sections there. She has worked as assistant curator at the ethnological museums in Munich and Vienna and as guest researcher at the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin. Author of many works on carpets and kilims, the art of metalworking, museology and cultural change, she was named Museologist of the Year in Turkey and has received international recognition and honours including the Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres from France, the Bundesverdienstkreuz order from Germany, the Kryzem Kawalerskim order from Poland and the order of Cavalieri di Omri from Italy.*

If you live in a country where the majority of the population are Muslims, and where countless works of art from every area of Islamic culture have been created in the distant and recent past, then it is no surprise to encounter them at every step as an intrinsic part of life there. Educated eyes are aware of them, of course, and of the monuments and artefacts inherited from other past civilizations outside the Islamic tradition. These might be works of architecture, whether standing or in ruins, a bookbinding, a single leaf of a book, a faded fresco or a wall fountain in a hidden corner.

But for the great majority these traces of the past are a sight to which they are inured. They neither know nor wonder how they came to be there, when or for what purpose they were made. They are just a part of daily life, and while some remain, others disappear over time. There is no awareness of how the creations of the past influence and enrich our aesthetic understanding, adding to its dimensions, even if this process is unconscious. When women unconcernedly hang out their laundry on strings stretched between ancient gravestones in cemeteries hemmed in by houses in poor districts, is it just because the stones are a familiar part of their environment, or do the stones mean no more to them than the branch of a tree?

In Turkey we are used to people who have no idea of the name of the local mosque or fountain in the neighbourhood where they have lived for years, and shrug their shoulders when asked when they were built or by whom. Perhaps this attitude is due in part to Eastern peoples' acceptance of fate and the temporary nature of everything in this world, but also to some extent to the influx into our crowded cities of newcomers who are strangers to this past. Whatever the reason

might be, the result is that hardly anyone is particularly disturbed by the felling of an ancient tree, the demolition of a historic house, the theft of an inscription, or the gradual decay of a monument through neglect, and before long the incident is sure to be forgotten.

If that is the state of affairs in our cities, what then is it in our villages and towns? Unfortunately, the general consensus everywhere seems to be that what is needed is change, in the shortest possible time and at whatever cost. As advanced telecommunications technology brings scenes from the modern world to television screens in even the remotest parts of the country, the desire to resemble the outside world as fast as possible becomes irresistible, uprooting ways of life, traditional dress and other habits and customs of centuries.

Under these conditions what chance does the museum curator have of collecting and researching works of Islamic art, regional architecture, folk art, traditional costume and other legacies? If, not content with existing and static collections gathered in the past, curators attempt to collect additional objects, or new objects and material relating to daily life which they believe should be saved for posterity in a rapidly changing world, can they succeed? Can they persuade the imams and caretakers of rural and urban mosques who eagerly take the first opportunity to exchange the fine worn carpets spread on the cold stone floors, which have somehow managed to survive, for brand new machine made, wall-to-wall carpeting, that those worn carpets are far more precious and should be preserved? How can they explain to the occupants of an old house who suffer the trials of carrying water in buckets from the well into their old-fashioned kitchen, and who



long to pull it down and build a comfortable modern house in its place, the importance of their old house in our architectural heritage? Won't they ask themselves whether if they were in that person's position they would think any differently? In my long professional life I have often asked myself these questions.

### The challenge of change

In my endeavours to preserve the works of the past, sometimes *in situ* but more often in the museum, I have experienced helplessness in the face of rapidly changing environmental conditions. We have been programmed to preserve the 'past', but how are we supposed to explain the present and the future to those who come after us? I have studied and taken an interest in many areas of Turkish and Islamic art, but at the same time I have made it my object to study folk art and folk life, which are the natural extension of the fine arts and at the same time their roots, and to exhibit both under the same roof.

In our villages people recently wove and are still weaving carpets on similar looms and with the same materials which in the past produced celebrated examples. Our museum treasures specimens of metalwork going back many centuries, while in the cities of Anatolia craftsmen are still making metal objects using the same methods as their fifteenth-century counterparts. The ritual flagons and flasks carried by palace servants accompanying the sultan as depicted in miniature paintings are still being made in the same forms by elderly Turkmen craftsmen in mountain villages.

Keeping track of cultural change is as important as cultural continuity, and this



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process of change and its products should also be preserved for future generations. Although such an approach is natural for ethnographic museums, it was not easy to adopt it at the renowned Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art, with its spectacular collections of precious carpets, manuscripts, metalwork, ceramics and woodwork.

For a long time the puritanical art historian demanded to know what these 'coarse' and 'rough' objects were doing among the refined art works of the museum. Yes, we possessed rare ivory, amber and mother-of-pearl rosaries that had all been used by the sultans, but it was hard to convince my colleagues that these rosaries had been made on a simple wooden lathe like the one we had purchased from the last great rosary maker before his death, even though we had acquired the lathe together with all his raw materials and half-completed rosaries.

We had thousands of carpets, but not a single carpet loom. We had no examples of vegetable dyes, carpet scissors, or combs. We possessed fourteenth- and fifteenth-century carved doors, and eighteenth-century fitted cupboards and panels made by master craftsmen. And in our wooden 'room' taken from a village house (which

*The interior of a typical village house in western Anatolia, reconstructed after the original layout and with original wooden elements.*



*The Divanbane ceremonial hall of the Ibrahim Pasa Palace, now the exhibition hall for carpets and works of art from the classical Ottoman period of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.*

had been demolished to make way for a new one) in western Anatolia, there were the same type of cupboards, only simpler, which could be seen *in situ* to illustrate their functions. We had examples of rare fabrics covering many centuries, and fabric looms that we had brought from Bursa, a city famous above all for its silks, velvets and towelling. The looms consisted of innumerable different parts which were a mystery to most of us, yet those celebrated fabrics were woven on looms identical or similar to these.

Did we have any disappointments? Of course we did! When we travelled for days to reach a remote village to watch and document an authentic rural wedding ceremony, the bride showed us a trousseau which she proudly explained contained nothing of village manufacture at all. And when we searched for local craftsmen's tools only to discover that they were no longer in use, we were dismayed to find that we were too late.

#### **A turning point**

If today these two collections of different character and origin attract the admiration

of visitors to the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art, this is due in large part to our new building, where we moved in 1983, and which marked a genuine turning point in the life of the museum.

The Orientalist movement which influenced all areas of art in the nineteenth century, the Oriental manufactures which were exhibited at the international World expositions, and the Western fascination with the 'Orient', albeit focusing primarily on antiquities and archaeological sites, gave rise to widespread interest in Islamic art. The Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art, the last museum to be established in the Ottoman Empire, was originally founded as a precaution against the smuggling of Islamic art works from the extensive lands of the Ottoman Empire. After a long period of preparation, it finally opened in 1914 in the *imaret* (public kitchen) attached to the Süleymaniye Mosque. At the time this building was undoubtedly an acceptable choice, and its architectural importance was undeniable, but it offered no scope for the museum's own development. Minor rearrangements and some attempts to keep up with advancing technology between 1914 and 1983 could be no more than cosmetic measures, far from the fundamental changes that were needed.

The opportunity came when it was decided at the end of the 1960s to relocate the museum in the Ibrahim Pasa Palace. This sixteenth-century building stood at the edge of the ancient Hippodrome in Istanbul's historic centre. It was in a state of ruin and parts had been occupied by various institutions, so a long period of restoration lay ahead. Work on the building began in 1968 and continued intermittently until 1982. My colleagues and I were involved in every stage of the restoration work between 1972 and 1982, excited at taking part in bringing this remarkable building to

life again. Walking along the wooden scaffolding looking into the empty rooms and long corridors as the cold winter winds swept through the windowless apertures and doorless entrances, I used to envisage the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art as it would be many years on.

Our advantage in moving from one historic building to another was that we were able to co-operate with the technical team throughout the restoration process and so guide it to suit our needs. Moreover, it was ideally situated in the heart of the old city next to Hagia Sophia, Sultan Ahmed Mosque (the Blue Mosque) and the Hippodrome.

Ibrahim Pasa had served as Grand Vizier between 1523 and 1536 during the early part of Süleyman the Magnificent's reign, and his palace was one of the most important examples of secular architecture to have survived from the sixteenth century. Those parts still standing would provide an appropriate setting for the great art collections of the museum, and also leave room to display the ethnographic collection which we had spent long years amassing.

When we eventually moved in we decided to use the gallery on the ground floor for temporary exhibitions, mainly of collections from abroad, and including both historical and contemporary works of art from Asia, Europe, and North and South America. These exhibitions give visitors the opportunity to see different concepts and approaches to art. I believe that this is an important function for a museum housing Islamic art. The dimensions of political and cultural exchange that have taken place over long centuries between countries and continents, and the resulting influence on their art, can be clearly seen and understood at such

carefully chosen exhibitions. They serve to remind visitors of the process of reciprocal influence and the universality of art.

The Ethnography Gallery on the next floor is entered via the courtyard. Here tableaux designed with as much imagination as the architectural limitations allow present glimpses into traditional Turkish life.

In the section on nomadic life are two tents, one a circular felt Turkmen tent (known as a *yurt* or *topak ev*), used until relatively recently in the district of Salihli in western Anatolia and representing the extension of Central Asian culture in Turkey; and the other a goat-hair *kara çadır*, of the type used by nomads in the Toros Mountains in south-eastern and southern Anatolia and also found in other parts of the Near East and North Africa. The tents are exhibited together with their contents, furnishings and models, the layout based on documentary evidence of their original use.

The other scenes are a village house together with its façades, and two late-nineteenth-century provincial houses, one from Bursa and the other from Istanbul which illustrates the Western influence of this period and the changing way of life.

I must reiterate that the scenes have been adapted to the architectural space where they are located, because the necessary compromise between the relatively small space and our wish to preserve the coherence of the whole and enable visitors to comprehend what they are seeing obliged us to keep to the framework of a clear concept and theme. Just as, between 1983 and 1985 scenes illustrating ceremonies relating to birth, circumcision and marriage were used as the exhibition framework on the theme of 'Transitional



*The living room of a typical town house in nineteenth-century Bursa.*

Ceremonies in Social Life’, so we are planning our next thematic exhibition on the subject of craftsmen and tradesmen in an urban street setting.

### **A thousand years of Islamic history**

The second floor of the museum, which includes the palace’s famous ceremonial hall, the Divanhane, from which many of the Ottoman sultans watched public processions and parades, is devoted entirely to the museum’s Islamic collection. The chronologically arranged exhibition covers over 1,000 years from the early Islamic period of the seven-to-eighth centuries up to the nineteenth century. Some of the objects are archaeological finds from sites like Tell-Halaf, Rakka and Samarra, but the majority are works collected from mosques, tombs and libraries. Works purchased for, or donated to, the museum have begun to constitute a significant part of the collection over recent years. The largest carpets, whose scale harmonizes with that of the building, can only be exhibited in the Divanhane, with its large walls and high ceilings. The main principle we follow in arranging exhibits is always to establish a balance between the

building and the object, and to avoid filling the building to an extent that would detract from its own presence. I believe that we have succeeded in this.

It hardly needs saying that we can only display a tiny fraction of the thousands of manuscripts, hundreds of wooden, metal and ceramic objects, and nearly 2,000 carpets in the museum collection. We display objects in rotation or in the context of special exhibitions, in preparation for which the objects are treated by our conservation experts. Exhibitions held abroad are further opportunities to display lesser known pieces from the collection.

The museum’s textile laboratory is of very great importance for our carpets and fabrics. Since the conservation of objects other than textiles demands special laboratory facilities and experts, these are sent to the central laboratory for specialized treatment and care. As for the reserves, which are as important as the exhibition galleries, the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art is fortunate in having fully technically equipped storage facilities.

What kind of mission should be adopted by a museum dedicated to Islamic art, in a country with a long past in the context of Islamic culture? What should its attitude to a changing society be, and what targets should it embrace? These are questions to which I believe the time has come for an answer. We apply the following principles here.

First, priority is given to the finest examples of Islamic art, and at the same time strict compliance with conservation principles is observed. In this respect the museum should set an example and offer guidance to the public and to the increasing numbers of private collectors in this field who come here to learn.

Second, the message is conveyed that worn and damaged objects (which in our collection generally means carpets and kilims that have been spread on the floors of mosques for centuries) are important, have aesthetic and historic value, and even in their worn state represent an invaluable cultural heritage. Only in this way can there be hope for objects in private hands which are in danger of being destroyed because their owners do not appreciate their value.

Third, by means of exhibiting objects illustrating well-defined art movements, styles, or the tastes of specific centuries, either in total or in the context of a theme, the visitor should be encouraged to think, to forge links between the objects, and in looking at the details not to lose sight of the whole.

Finally, when exhibiting an object, not just the work of art itself but the conditions under which it was made and the social and economic history behind it should be taken into account, and explained not only in the catalogue but at least on information panels and preferably (if means allow) by means of audiovisual techniques.

In the Ethnography Gallery we also have additional objectives, the most important being to serve as a 'memory' for our people, because, like individuals, societies exist through their memories. When the lifestyles of a past so recent that it could be described as 'yesterday' are consigned to oblivion, so that people have difficulty remembering even how the previous generation lived, it is our duty to remind people and our society of that lost world. Therefore we want individuals and institutions to be aware of this, and to preserve the documents and objects of their own private histories. Perhaps in this

way we can explain to future generations that we have a real past which is worth preserving.

When we define museums as living entities which need to develop, this entails their being responsible not only for the care and display of existing collections, but also for a continuous process of new acquisition. As yet it still seems possible to obtain ethnographic material partly by fieldwork and partly by donations or purchases from families. However, the scale and prices reached by the art market both at home and abroad make it increasingly difficult to obtain the Islamic works of art required to complete our collections.

In this respect our relations with private collectors are increasingly important. We are aware of the fact that every serious collection could end up in a museum or be transformed into a private museum, and as a result of legislation that subjects certain collections to inspection by the museum, we know what items these collections contain. Because of this close relationship with collectors we have been able to acquire certain important groups of objects for the museum.

When we look back along the long and difficult road that we have travelled, we can say that our achievements have been considerable. But this is just part of the way, and a very major project awaits us – that of acquiring the section of the Ibrahim Pasa Palace which is still in other hands, and transforming it into new exhibition galleries for the objects lying in our storerooms. Considering the obstacles we have already managed to overcome, I am confident that this too can be achieved. ■

# An ongoing dialogue: the Museum of the Institute of the Arab World in Paris

*Brahim Alaoui*

*The Institut du Monde Arabe (IMA) in Paris is home to a museum with a mission: to foster a greater dialogue between the two civilizations that have developed on the opposite shores of the Mediterranean. Presenting the art of the Arab-Muslim world to a largely European public is the challenge described by Brahim Alaoui, head of the Contemporary Art Department and director of the Museum and Exhibitions at the IMA. Moroccan born, he began his career as a researcher at the Paris City Museum of Modern Art and has contributed to several collective works and published many catalogues, notably on Arab artists. Through his writings and the exhibitions he has organized, Brahim Alaoui is one of the few mediators to establish a living link between the Arab-Muslim world of the past and present and the European art scene. He is a member of the International Association of Art Critics and the International Council of Museums (ICOM).*

Before considering the presentation of Islamic art in France, the attitudes of the French public to this specific art form and the particular role played by the Institute of the Arab World, a brief reference to the history of the creation of the IMA, its initial mission and subsequent development is appropriate. A reference to the status enjoyed by the museum and the exhibitions organized at the institute may also be helpful.

In 1987, when it was inaugurated, Parisians discovered a centre which was astonishing for its originality, distinctive character and architecture. As a Franco-Arab cultural foundation, the IMA brings together twenty-two founder states. Its mission is to develop the study and knowledge of Arab culture and civilization and to promote dialogue and exchanges between France and the Arab world. With that aim in view, the IMA has created a venue for all kinds of activities, with the museum as its epicentre. This is part of a complex programme which includes various activities and facilities.

At the IMA, the library, audiovisual department and cultural actions programme weave a plural web around the museum in which literature, music and the cinema all enrich the audience. Through its underlying concept, the IMA favours a pluridisciplinary approach. This gives the museum an opportunity to unite and disseminate knowledge of the heritage of the Arab world and foster a better understanding of its civilization.

This 'globalizing' concept enables links to be established between the different functions and activities, and conveys an image of dynamic continuity. We therefore tend to choose themes and events that are shared by all the different entities present within the institute.

Through its temporary exhibitions, the museum is projected into the public areas and extended by cultural events (music and performing arts), information brought together in the library and specific programmes set up on the occasion of these exhibitions (lectures, debates). The intention is to understand the unity and diversity of the Arab world, its past and its future. Many different cultural instruments are used for that purpose. However, the fact remains that the museum itself plays a dominant role because a majority of the cultural events at the IMA are shaped by the programme of temporary exhibitions organized there.

## **An evolving museum**

At the outset, the IMA was designed to accommodate some of the collections of the Museums of France. The creation of the Grand Louvre deprived it of these important works and might even have endangered the existence of the IMA museum. Under difficult conditions, it completed the transformation imposed by this withdrawal of exhibits. The institute lacked the resources to compensate its loss by acquisitions. Today, the approach consists in presenting Arab-Muslim art through a new, more educational museography receptive to the new technologies and better able to put across its message and facilitate an understanding of the nature of this civilization.

At the same time, the museum has attained a state of equilibrium and found a new vocation through the organization of major temporary exhibitions. These attract an audience that is less interested in the permanent activities of the institute. The IMA museum has progressively developed its activities and acquired a fund of experience, which now goes back



© P. Maillard, IMA

ten years. It has laid down cultural roots, with the emphasis less on conservation than on dissemination. Temporary exhibitions have become a vital part of its prestigious reputation. The museum regularly invites the public to witness presentations of particular facets of Arab-Muslim art in order to enable French and European visitors to discover the rich Arab-Muslim civilization from different angles and in an attractive presentation.

The museum has the benefit of extensive spaces for temporary exhibitions, and organizes major events devoted to the heritage of particular countries – for example: *Syria, Memory and Civilization*; *Sudan, Kingdoms on the Nile*; *Yemen, in the Country of the Queen of Sheba*; *Lebanon, the Other Shore* – as well as exhibitions on more specialized themes. The former often break out beyond the framework of Islamic art to focus on ‘archaeological’ periods. The latter seek to highlight the major arts of Islamic civilization, for instance: ceramics in *Secret Lands of Samarkand*; textiles in *Colours of Tunisia*; *Carpets, Presence of the East in the West*; and *Silk and Gold, Maghreb Embroidery*; and areas in which the Arab world has played a dominant role (*Medicine in the Days of the Caliphs*).

Then there are ethnographic events (*Memory of Silk, Palestinian Dresses*) and, above all, those devoted to modern and contemporary Arab art. These are not

merely a specific feature of the IMA, but also create an awareness of the contemporary prolongations of Islamic art and its impact on the plastic arts in East and West alike.

### A privileged setting

At a time when rejection and withdrawal into isolation are again becoming prevalent on both shores of the Mediterranean, the IMA for its part is trying to become the privileged setting for the expression of the strength of projects that promote meetings and exchanges between cultures. The mission of the IMA must be seen in this context in a Europe that is itself in the throes of change. As the instrument of an outward-looking approach, the institute is a focal point for the encounter between Europe and the Arab countries. The institute facilitates contacts between these two cultures and plays a privileged role in promoting good conditions for this encounter.

Of course, the confrontation between two cultures is just as difficult and hazardous a venture as a meeting between two human beings. It may be happy or tempestuous. But while the meeting between two individuals is a matter of chance, the meeting between two neighbouring cultures is in a sense predetermined. Geography fashions history. But despite this proximity and a relationship that has

*View of the exhibition Secret Lands of Samarkand.*



*Ancient works from the exhibition Jordan, in the Footsteps of the Archaeologists.*

existed for over thirteen centuries, Arab-Muslim culture remains largely unknown in Europe today. The decisive historical contribution made by the civilization of Islam to the development of knowledge and skills is unfortunately not appreciated at its true value.

The Greek and Latin sources of European culture, to which reference is constantly made, are accompanied by Arab sources that generally remain concealed. Across the Mediterranean, relations between Europe and the Arab world exist in a historical and cultural continuum that is rarely understood. The action taken by the IMA is built on this common foundation, which must be constantly consolidated. The institute has an important role to play in valorizing the Arab cultural heritage and identifying, through presentation, research and debate, the factors which make for solidarity and tension between the Mediterranean civilizations; by fostering links between the common sources, bringing the interaction between these two cultures to light and, above all, by acting to ensure that the unity and

diversity of the Arab world are better appreciated.

The aim of the IMA museum is to create a greater familiarity between two civilizations. It wants to help the men, women and children who are at one and the same time heirs and players to escape from their historical logic of mutual distrust and reach out to meet each other with a human desire for mutual enrichment, peaceful exchange and partnership. Because of that sometimes contradictory reality, the IMA has an acute awareness of its task. After developing its activities to respond to needs or wishes and making obligatory choices, its duty now is to organize a programme – and it is well-equipped to do so – which will be structured to give it a distinctive image by determining its priorities and shaping its future.

#### **A museum for which audience?**

The new approach which underlies the action of the IMA is directly inspired by



the expectations of the public and pragmatically seeks appropriate ways and means of enabling the exchange and the process of discovery to take place in an intense and effective manner. We do not want to appeal to an anonymous body of visitors, but to audiences whose habits and needs vary.

First, there are the 11- to 12-year-old schoolchildren who are studying Islam in their history lessons. Their teachers often bring them to the museum to round off their classes. For all concerned, this is an opportunity for an instructive visit: the oldest mosque in Paris is just ten minutes' walk away from the IMA. Teachers can therefore introduce their pupils simultaneously to the Muslim religion and Islamic art objects. This visit is not systematically made in its entirety because, for some, a visit to the IMA alone is sufficient to gain an insight into the entire Muslim civilization. Children generally follow the guided tour attentively right through to the end of the hour-and-a-half-long visit. They remain receptive despite the many new words that they hear: minbar, mihrab, mosque, etc. They are naturally attracted by this different culture about which they hear so much. Here lecturers enable them to approach the culture from a different angle by appealing to their imagination. For instance, carpet-making may be presented. The motifs and their meaning and the intended use of a carpet are all explained. The visitors' attention is drawn to the permanence of geometrical shapes and calligraphy on different materials whose use and meaning are explained.

Classes of adolescent pupils also come to the museum. They are more interested in contemporary problems and they are both happy and surprised to discover a past whose richness they were far from



© P. Maillard, IMA

imagining. Their questions tend to concern problems of women, fundamentalism, etc.

Then there are the other audiences, that is, those whose decision to visit the museum is purely personal or collective. They come singly or in groups such as associations from deprived urban areas or groups of pensioners. Some come from far afield – the Benelux countries and the south of France – and are prepared to embark upon a marathon day to discover the museum, setting out at dawn and returning home late at night. These are adults or adolescents whose parents are of

*Modern and contemporary Arab art, shown in the Four Artists exhibition.*

Maghreb origin. Once again lecturers introduce the Arab-Muslim world and present Islamic art.

Unless they are students of Islamic art, individual visitors often have no bearings and need the explanations provided in the exhibition journal, explanatory panels and posters. They do not come simply to admire the art of the past but are also looking for answers to questions that concern a civilization that is well and truly alive, but whose contours they often have difficulty in tracing. They want to understand today's Muslim world by discovering and contemplating objects of the Muslim civilization of bygone times.

The museum furniture was designed at

the outset to evolve as the collection grew. Over the past ten years it has, however, become apparent that the way in which objects are presented must be constantly rethought so as to better guide the eye of visitors, especially those from Europe. The collections of Islamic art bring together objects that are essentially part of daily life, even if they owe their existence to a princely household or have a ceremonial character. Visitors must therefore be helped to understand their aesthetics and meaning, especially if they arrive with their own personal criteria as to the nature of an art work. There is no single solution but several different ways of rising to this challenge. The IMA museum therefore intends to explore all these different possibilities. ■

#### Note to readers

*In Museum International, No. 201, an article by Eléonore Kissel appeared under the title 'The Restorer: Key Player in Preventive Conservation'. The author, whose original text was written in French, has asked us to publish the following:*

In my article, the whole discussion deals with the specific qualifications, functions and responsibilities of the conservator-restorer versus those of the curator, in the field of preventive conservation. I had chosen, strictly in order to facilitate reading and to avoid confusion in French, to use the term '*restaurateur*' instead of '*conservateur-restaurateur*' despite the symbolic value attached to this latter term by the members of our profession. I explained this decision in Note 2, which stresses that the term '*conservateur-restaurateur*' has been endorsed by the European non-governmental body representing our profession. The English translation has made the whole text and notes completely impossible to understand by using the word 'restorer' for '*restaurateur*' (instead of 'conservator', which is the only proper term in English, unless it is used in conjunction with the word 'restorer', as in

'conservator-restorer'), and the word 'conservator' for 'curator', which is a completely different function and title.

Conservators are engaged in a very serious legal and administrative battle in most European countries, in order to gain professional and social recognition. I had very much hoped that my contribution to *Museum International*, which benefits from such a large circulation, would be a small addition to our collective message. I find that again, owing to lack of clarity in the vocabulary used around the world, it cannot be so. [In publishing this note] hopefully your readers may then be able to benefit from a reflexive article which, otherwise, simply cannot be understood.

*The Editor replies:*

UNESCO translators who contribute to *Museum International* are of the highest professional calibre and when in doubt usually consult the relevant technical literature and appropriate professional bodies. Nevertheless, in the interests of clarity, we deemed it fitting to transmit Ms Kissel's viewpoint to our readers.

# A literary legacy: the National Steinbeck Center in Salinas

John C. Stickler

*After twenty long years of fund-raising, the dream of the Steinbeck Foundation in Salinas, California, came true on 27 June 1998 with the gala opening of the National Steinbeck Center Museum. One thousand guests enjoyed the event, celebrating this agricultural valley's most famous son, Nobel prize-winning author John Steinbeck, who died in Salinas in December 1968 and is buried there in the Garden of Memories Cemetery, about 3 km from his birthplace. California-based freelance writer John C. Stickler tells the story.*

'It is a literary museum like no other in this country,' says Amanda Holder, communications director of the sparkling new \$10.6 million National Steinbeck Center Museum. Unlike most sites honouring celebrated writers, this one goes beyond just showing you where so-and-so slept, wrote, or died. Way beyond! This one reaches out, grabs you by the shirt and pulls you right into Steinbeck's life and the very pages of his books.

Building on contemporary museum design which strives to involve the viewer with actual artefacts of the time, video snippets, tape recordings and sensory effects, exhibit designers Formations Inc. of Portland, Oregon, pushed the envelope even further here to create a full multimedia experience. Keeping the educational value of the displays in the forefront, they borrowed from San Francisco's Exploratorium concept and provided numerous props for children to handle, climb and inspect within a 745 m<sup>2</sup> exhibition hall. On 'The Red Pony' set, kids can mount a realistic pony mannequin and sit in a beautifully hand-tooled leather saddle. At the 'laboratory' of the Spreckels Sugar Company, where Steinbeck worked between college semesters at Stanford University, magnifying glasses invite inspection of rock-sized sugar crystals. In the 'Cannery Row' set, magnifying glasses are also handy in Doc's Western Biological lab to examine real Monterey Bay marine specimens in glass jars: starfish, sand dollars and squid.

The humour inherent in Steinbeck's work sneaks delightfully into the displays. Doc's bunk bed is neatly made with an army blanket. The observant museum-goer will notice the lacy undergarments and the red high-heel shoes scattered casually under the bed.

Of course *The Grapes of Wrath* and *East of Eden* played a major part in Steinbeck's literary career and they are well represented here. A video shows actor Henry Fonda in his cinema role as the elder Joad, and posters of James Dean illustrate the film version of *East of Eden*. As one moves through the exhibits, Henry Fonda reappears, this time reading aloud from *America and the Americans*.

For those unfamiliar with the books, splashes of relevant text are stencilled everywhere, integrated into the sets, even on fabrics such as pillowcases. A row of period jackets and hats on pegs represents *Of Mice and Men*. In dialogue stencilled on the wall Lenny disclaims killing the mouse in his pocket. 'I found it dead!' he swears. A really interactive viewer might put a hand into one of the pockets of the largest jacket and find a little furry object inside.

Not to deprive any of the senses, the complete Steinbeck ambience includes odours. Sardine scent adds to the realism of Monterey's historic canneries, the Red Pony stall smells of hay, and a dog collar mounted on one wall will, when scratched, give off the odour of an old dog. Standing before the open railroad boxcar of 'iced lettuce', a visitor may feel a flow of chilled air spilling out of the realistic display. An adobe Mexican plaza expresses the Hispanic images of *The Pearl*, *The Forgotten Village* and Steinbeck's film script for *Viva Zapata!*

One of Steinbeck's last books was *Travels with Charley: In Search of America*, published in 1962. An illuminated map traces his route around the United States with Charley, the French poodle. 'Rocinante', Steinbeck's actual camper, mounted on his carefully restored 1960



*The lobby of the National Steinbeck Center.*

GMC pickup truck, is parked right there in the museum. Standing at the rear door of the vehicle, one can see into the illuminated interior and easily imagine the author seated at the drop-down table enjoying a glass of Scotch whisky at the end of a long day on the road. (Unfortunately 'Rocinante' is screened off with sheets of Plexiglas which make it impossible to touch and difficult to photograph.)

In order to make sure they were doing it right, the museum administrators held in-depth discussion groups to review the planned displays. 'We hired an actual focus group studio in San Francisco,' said the museum's executive director Patricia Leach, 'with the one-way glass and all.

We invited four different groups to get their feedback: museum administrators, parents, Hispanics and educators. Their input was invaluable.' Steinbeck scholars also critiqued the presentation concepts and content before their installation.

#### **'Rich lode of historic material'**

'It was easy,' said Craig Kerger, president and chief designer of Formations Inc. 'We had recently completed an [Abraham] Lincoln museum which offered the same rich lode of historic material.' Working with a budget of \$2.2 million, Kerger and his staff of designers and researchers spent two years planning and two years constructing the elaborate interpretive displays. (The new Lincoln Museum is in Fort Wayne, Indiana.)

In addition to creating sets and scenes depicting locations in Steinbeck's books, the researchers also scoured the countryside to acquire actual artefacts from the period. These include everything from fruit-and-vegetable packing-crate labels and farm implements to film posters and newspaper cuttings. Some of the historic items are from the collection of literary memorabilia in the Steinbeck library.

Before entering the labyrinth of the exhibits, visitors are invited to sit in the small, forty-eight-seat theatre to the right of the entry gallery and enjoy a ten-minute biographical videotape on Steinbeck which neatly encapsulates his life and work: his youth in Salinas, his major literary works, his three marriages, his stint as a Second World War correspondent and his acceptance of the 1962 Nobel Prize for Literature.

The new two-storey building, barrel-vaulted with lots of brick and glass, is



© National Steinbeck Center

imposing without being pretentious. It was designed to serve a number of functions in addition to showcasing Steinbeck's life and works. A multi-purpose room in the east wing allows it to become a community cultural centre for public programmes while both the terraced restaurant and the book/gift shop may be accessed from the outside without having to pay the museum admission fees.

Across the light-filled central lobby, a 375 m<sup>2</sup> art gallery offers exhibits that change throughout the year. The inaugural show was entitled *This Side of Eden: Images of Steinbeck's California*. It was a precious collection of some sixty-five paintings from the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s that offered a pure, innocent glimpse of the people and landscapes of the period – the same views that provided such inspiration to the author. Some of the works had never been displayed in public before and included rare portraits of Steinbeck.

Of course the new centre also houses a library and archive of Steinbeck's literary legacy. The collection includes some 30,000 first editions, autographed copies, manuscripts, galley proofs, correspondence, 'living history' interviews, motion picture and television scripts, posters, and much more.

A separate Art of Writing Room is a museum resource area designed for both children and adults. Three computer stations are available for visitors to study CD-ROMs of Steinbeck stories or explore the museum's website. A 'virtual tour' programme allows the viewer to see the past and present changing exhibits in the art gallery via the computer screen. And a VCR monitor shows the film clips that play at seven locations in the exhibition hall or makes available other Steinbeck-related videotapes.

Planned for 1999 is a 465 m<sup>2</sup> annexe to house the Salinas Valley Agricultural History and Education Center.

*The exhibit on The Grapes of Wrath, the great American novel of the 1930s Depression, which unfolds the tale of a refugee family from the Oklaboma dust bowl, their migration to California and the struggle to find work under an almost feudal system of agricultural exploitation.*



*The Nobel Prize exhibit: Steinbeck accepting the 1962 Prize for Literature.*

### **Fund-raising challenge**

Director of Development Joseph W. Pastori joined the Steinbeck Foundation early in 1997, the year before the grand opening. His dual challenge was successfully to complete the \$10.6 million capital campaign and launch an ambitious membership drive. 'The project actually began back in 1977,' Pastori says, 'with the establishment of the John Steinbeck Foundation. Then in 1983, the official, non-profit corporation was chartered as the National Steinbeck Center.' The

original goal was to build a wing on the Salinas Library to house the city's extensive collection of Steinbeck materials and make them available for public viewing.

In 1993 the city of Salinas appointed the centre to head up the Steinbeck Festival, a now popular annual event celebrating the author, his life, works and the community that nurtured him. That same year, the centre contracted with Logic Incorporated to prepare a feasibility study for the centre's proposed museum building.

The completed report projected that such a facility, if well located and properly managed, would greatly serve the community and attract visitors to Salinas. The study was so positive about the potential of such a project that in 1994 the city administrators made available a key parcel of land at the north end of Main Street. They also promised additional development funding of \$3.5 million if the project moved ahead and met certain planning and design requirements. By the end of 1994, an operating plan was enthusiastically adopted and the following February the capital campaign was announced.

During 1995 some significant grants were pledged, including \$1 million from a long-established Salinas agricultural family. A formal groundbreaking ceremony took place at the site in April 1997 and by that December total funds raised passed the \$8 million mark. A key contributor was the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, which committed two \$500,000 contributions, even though construction funding falls outside of their granting guidelines.

According to Pastori, 'an extraordinarily small group, only about 150 entities' (individuals, corporations and non-profit foundations) has covered the construction

cost of the centre. He plans to finalize the capital campaign by the end of May 1999.

'We did not expect to fund the restaurant,' says Pastori. 'That \$500,000 expense was allocated to a food-service lessee. But there were no acceptable bidders for the space, so we had to add that amount to our capital goal.' The museum manages the restaurant itself.

Pastori's background is in the field of fund-raising for public television, so he is experienced in providing coffee mugs and CDs in return for pledges. The software on his computer is the same as that used by public broadcasting stations nationwide. It works just as well for tracking museum memberships, he says. The centre offers six levels of membership, all including a quarterly newsletter, from a \$40 individual pass up to the Nobel Prize Circle, a lifetime membership at \$2,500. 'We are five months ahead of schedule on our membership target,' Pastori reports. 'The goal was 5,000 members at the end of the first twelve months. We are already past 2,500 and I'm raising the bar to 5,700.'

Membership solicitation is done by direct mail. The key list of prospective members comprises, of course, individual donors to the centre over the past twenty years, then participants in the annual Steinbeck Festival. Those two groups provided the highest percentage of adhesions. Next is a

collection of 54,000 cards, entries in a new home giveaway promotion that benefited the centre. (That list is still being mined.) After that, mailings went out to target lists selected by postal code.

'We picked names that lived within a certain geographical radius of Salinas, all home-owners in single-family residences,' says Pastori. 'Before the June opening we had dropped 100,000 solicitation letters and another 60,000 after. So far we are averaging about 1 per cent joining.' Within an eighteen-month period Pastori expects to send out a million letters, locally and nationally.

At Number One Main Street, the new museum anchors the tree-shaded Old-town Salinas, not much changed since the 1940s. City officials are counting on an influx of tourists to help revitalize Salinas' ageing core. Boarded-up retail shops and a vacant cinema adjacent to the new National Steinbeck Center underscore the important role it is expected to play. ■

#### Note

Salinas, California, is south of San José and east of Monterey, with airports serving both cities. The centre's website is:  
[www.steinbeck.org](http://www.steinbeck.org)

# Access denied: can we overcome disabling attitudes?

Raj Kaushik

*The museum world has still a long way to go if it is to become a welcoming environment for disabled visitors, a problem addressed with insight and sensitivity by Raj Kaushik. Trained as a physicist and with a Ph.D. in Museum Studies, he entered the field of science museums in 1987 and worked for five years at the National Council of Science Museums, India, as Curator (Physics). In 1992, he joined the Department of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, United Kingdom, as Commonwealth Scholar, and since 1996, has been Exhibits Manager at the Discovery Centre, Halifax, Canada, where he is responsible for all aspects of exhibit design, development and installation. He has written research papers on such topics as science museums in India, Indian science education, adult education and attitude development in museums, and has also published numerous popular science articles.*

Perhaps since the evolution of life on earth, the word 'disability' has had negative connotations inextricably associated with it. The Bible, Vedas, Puranas and other religious books are full of examples to this effect: bad people being cursed with disability and good people being rewarded with a cure. The Greek philosopher Plato in his *Republic* believed that if we want citizens to behave properly, we should ensure that they receive care and instruction from the finest people. Disability can be a punishment for bad behaviour and evil thoughts or for not being a good enough person. On screen and stage, disabled people are depicted as ugly, freakish, evil, villainous, antisocial, pitiable and pathetic. Obvious examples are Long John Silver with his wooden leg, Captain Hook with his hook, and Richard III with his crutches. From the director's point of view, Captain Hook without his hook would be a less impressive character and Richard III is not quite villainous enough by virtue of his actions alone. In fact, his character collapses totally when it is visualized without crutches. The parallel between twisted minds and twisted bodies is found almost everywhere – in religious books, films, classic stories, Victorian fiction, and so on.

Images created by the media are not passive. Rather, they actively create meanings for their viewers. According to the contemporary post-modern French theorist Jean Baudrillard, our ideas of the world are a set of media images through which reality is constructed and in this reality there can be seen four prominent models of disability: 'evil and horror', 'overcoming all odds', 'charity' and the 'medical' model. In these stereotypes, disabled people are mostly judged in terms of their deficiency and rarely in terms of their individual personalities. In

the present 'equal opportunities for all' era, disability is being dealt with in a 'politically correct' way – that is to say, it gets paid lip service in all social arenas, including museums and cultural centres.

In this article, I shall explore how museums deal with the chapter of disability and disabled people. The discussion and suggestions that follow are the expressions of my own interpretations of the findings. Nevertheless, care has been taken that they do not get polluted by institutional loyalty, personal biases and idiosyncrasies.

Museums belong to people and are committed to delivering specialized services to a growing public. In the 1970s, museums, particularly in the United States, made a conscious effort to attract disabled people. The concept of 'disabled access' was appreciated worldwide. At its eleventh general conference the International Council of Museums (ICOM) recommended that museums take active steps to ensure maximum accessibility and to expand adequately adapted programmes. The editors of various museum journals allocated more space than ever before to articles dealing with questions concerning disabled people and some even brought out special issues dedicated to this subject. In 1988, the first international conference on 'Museums and Disabled People' was organized by the Fondation de France. The mission of the conference was to send a clear message that culture is not a luxury but an essential link between the members of a community. Disabled people must have the opportunity to share our common cultural heritage and reap its benefits.

Today, we see almost everywhere in museums nicely hung or placed signs showing our great concern for the disabled





Photo by courtesy of the author

and special-needs public. We see photographs of the visitor in a wheelchair at prominent places in museum publications and annual reports. We also find similar videoclips in museums' in-house film productions. 'The museum is completely wheelchair accessible': one can also find such catchy blurbs flashing on the Websites of most museums. Seeing all this, one may perhaps conclude that the museum world has eventually achieved, or is very near to achieving, the goal of disabled 'access' and of providing equal opportunities to all visitors.

But, regretfully, this is an illusion, mainly created by our disabling attitudes. These attitudes are explained, perhaps in the best way, by the Self-Presentation Theory of Attitudes, which states that people (museum professionals in the present context) do whatever is the bare minimum to make themselves appear consistent with the prevailing social norms, but, in reality, they remain indifferent.

### Letting the (healthy) people in

As in the past, today's museums are perceived as unique institutions which are meant to fulfil higher-level human

needs. Museum architects symbolize this understanding of museums in their building design and accordingly often build museums on perches. During the last twenty years or so, twenty museums have been constructed and developed under the aegis of the National Council of Science Museums (NCSM) in India and all have flights of stairs as qualifying barriers. In the purpose-built Rajiv Gandhi National Science Centre in Delhi, one has to negotiate at least ten flights of stairs, on average each comprised of twenty-five steps, to see only three main exhibition halls. One day I met a visitor in a gallery on the third floor walking with the support of two sticks to compensate the loss of his one leg. Out of his enthusiasm and interest he had negotiated all the steps on his own. On the way, he obviously passed by the ticket window and information desk. 'Nobody has offered me help. Nobody asked me to use elevators,' he told me plainly, on asking. On paper, the centre boasts the provision of back-door access and elevators for these guests.

In the Crafts Museum, Delhi, perhaps every corner inside is easily accessible except for the main gate which makes it a 'museum with barriers'. In the National

*Snibston Discovery Centre, Leicestershire, United Kingdom. Provisions, provisions everywhere: are we very close to achieving our goal of providing equal opportunities to all?*

Photo by courtesy of the author



*The Crafts Museum, Delhi. The main entrance makes it a 'museum with barriers'.*

Museum of Natural History one has to climb a few steps to be able to use an elevator which is officially provided for the convenience of the museum staff. It appears really surprising, and frustrating as well, that designers do not take into account the long-established physiological measurements of metalogical functions. For example, it is known that climbing stairs requires twice as much energy as walking on level ground.<sup>1</sup>

During my visit to the Experimentarium: The Danish Science Centre, in Copenhagen, I saw two staff members physically lifting a pushchair and negotiating it up to the first-floor entrance. 'It saves time and avoids many operations like picking up the elevator key from the office, operating it and then returning the key,' one of the staff members told me. Many museums throw up their hands in horror at the financial prospects of putting in an elevator. While an elevator may be ideal in the long-term, an inexpensive ramp can work well for immediate purposes. A classic example can be seen in the college campuses of Cambridge University in the United Kingdom, where nearly all the steps are fitted with inexpensive ramps.

In developed counties, we talk about provisions rather than services. We talk

about the number of wheelchairs available from information desks on request instead of talking about how many of them are in regular use. We proudly mention that we have provided Braille labels in galleries, but hardly divulge that out of 1,000 exhibits we have placed labels on only 30 and that only a few visitors use them. Government leaders and their advisers also mainly focus on provisions. Carolyn Keen, then disability adviser of the United Kingdom's Museums and Galleries Commission, speaks for many when she says: 'Disabled people are often excluded from or unable to participate fully in what are considered to be "normal" activities of all kinds because appropriate provision is not made to meet their needs.'<sup>2</sup>

A hastily prepared package of measures to boost disability rights in the United Kingdom also lays stress on the need for provisions. 'A new right of access to goods and services would require modification of trading premises where change was "readily achievable" subject to a financial limit,' reads a recent report.<sup>3</sup> In museums, provisions alone will not achieve the agreed objective of sharing our common cultural heritage and reaping benefits. The British Museum once offered sign-language interpretation for hearing-

impaired visitors. The arrangement could not work because there were not many users in the first place.

In developing countries we tend to boast about disabled-access provisions when they rarely exist. Even worse, we yodel about them when we have a couple of flights of steps, in purpose-built buildings, to be negotiated by one and all to reach the exhibition halls. We see a sign in front of the main entrance which reads 'Disabled Access This Way Please.' But on venturing further we find a ramp, meant for taking exhibit materials directly into storage, which mostly remains closed for security reasons.

### Why do they stay away?

Why do we not find as many disabled visitors in museums as we would like to see? Do they prefer to stay away from us? Admittedly, we do know awfully little about their world. 'Because I did not become "disabled" until the early 1980s, it was not until then that I was aware of the problems of equal access or of possible solutions to those problems; that non-awareness was symptomatic of many attitudes in an able-bodied world', said one visitor.<sup>4</sup>

I have a long association with special-needs people as my father is a principal in a school for the deaf without speech in India. I find that most of these children are treated indifferently by their parents and siblings who often feel ashamed to go out with them. Some students stay in the hostel during summer vacations because their parents consider them no less than trouble. The degree of their suffering also depends upon the financial status of their parents. Most special-needs people are, indeed, a rejected lot and have rare opportunities to

go out. From personal experience I have found them extremely sensitive, touchy and self-conscious – they can sense their victimization in no time. In his classic book, *The Nature of Prejudice*, Gordon Allport catalogued fifteen effects of victimization which may be reduced to two basic types: those that involve blaming oneself (withdrawal, self-hate, aggression) and those that involve blaming external causes (fighting back, suspiciousness, increased group pride). In the event of any obvious hostility, needy visitors, in my view, are more likely to adopt the simplest strategy – withdrawal – which is both undesirable and unfortunate. In order to find a solution, we need to evaluate our basic approach to the issue.

### 'Access' or 'accession'

'Access' is a buzzword in the museum profession today, yet the very word and its underlying philosophy seem to be the root of the problem for they lay stress on provisions rather than services. We hardly take this approach when we deal with museum collections. Consider a situation where we have all the facilities, for example display-cases, lighting and environmental controls, but no collections, and we wait for an assignment of objects to arrive on our doorstep: this situation illustrates the underlying philosophy of 'access'. Surely, it is destined to meet failure.

Now consider another situation where we know where a particular object is available, make all possible efforts to obtain it and once it is with us, we take care of it: this situation is an example of the underlying philosophy of 'accession'. And we all know that it has been the key factor behind the evolution and prosperity of museums.



*The Natural History Museum, London. Not all people can adapt to ill-considered design. Parents with a pushchair can somehow struggle up a flight of steps to the exhibition halls, but a wheelchair user cannot and is therefore trapped by architectural barriers.*

‘Accession’ means a heightened degree of a state that already exists, no matter how low its profile. The idea of increase, which is foreign to ‘access’, is present in ‘accession’. While the ‘access’ philosophy lets us blow our little efforts out of proportion, the concept of ‘accession’ does not allow us to talk in the air. In contrast, it mandates us to give plain statistics in terms of the proportion of the actual number of special visitors; for example, the number of blind visitors in relation to the total number of blind people in the vicinity of the museum – and in terms of services rather than provisions. It expects failures but not desperation. In a nutshell, it demands honesty and straightforwardness in our thoughts and actions.

We now have two paths. Naturally we would like to follow the one which leads us to success and prosperity. But can the act of replacing one word with another help us in overcoming our disabling attitudes? ‘The most powerful stimulus for changing minds is not a chemical. Or a baseball bat. It is a word,’ said George A. Miller, the former President of the American Psychological Association. The selection of a word is of basic importance as our self-concept associated with it influences our attitudes, our future behaviour and our actions. The use of the word ‘science centre’ in place of ‘science museum’ is a useful example to this effect. More precisely, it has turned our static, closed premises into dynamic, open display areas.

We can always talk of ‘access’ without having provisions and even without having a single visitor in our museums. The words that Tony Blair used at the Labour Party Conference in Blackpool on 4 October 1994 concerning the Tory Party seem much more fitting for ‘access’: ‘Its time is up. Its philosophy is done. Its experiment is over. Its failure is clear. It is time to go.’

Attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference. Curators have always had, and will always have, a very high regard for collecting and accession. With the same spirit, they now have to first collect special guests and then record their accession in museums. And in this way, museums really have the potential to appropriate culture. Remember, constraints like funding and space are easy to deal with, but creating sober and honest attitudes toward disability is a real challenge we face in the twenty-first century. ■

#### Notes

1. C. F. Consolazio, R. Johnson and L. Pecora, *Physiological Measurements of Metabolical Functions in Man*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1963.
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3. D. Brindle and P. Wintour, ‘New Rights for Disabled Welcome’, *The Guardian*, 25 November 1994.
4. W. Kirby, ‘Access to Learning for Adults with Disabilities’, in A. Chadwick and A. Stannett (eds.), *Museums and the Education of Adults*, Leicester, NIACE, 1995.

# A city confronts its past: Nuremberg's Documentation Centre on the Reich Party Congress site

Franz Sonnenberger

*An unconventional museum is being created in Nuremberg to offer German youth a window onto the history of the Third Reich, a part of their country's past that is often shrouded in myth and silence. The author has been director of the Nuremberg Municipal Museums since 1994. Prior to that he was head of department at the Nuremberg Centre for Industrial Culture from 1981 to 1991 and served from 1992 to 1994 as personal adviser to the Lord Mayor of Nuremberg.*

In Germany today, some 1,500 memorials and places of remembrance are specifically dedicated to the country's National Socialist past. Their task is generally to remind visitors of the fate of all those who lost their lives because of their political persuasion, race, religion or philosophical creed under the violent rule of the Nazis. The documentation of these crimes ranges from a simple memorial tablet at the place where the events occurred to complex exhibitions. These presentations can be seen in sixty-five historical locations, where expert staff are generally employed. The work done by them to remind visitors of the victims of the Nazi dictatorship and perform historical and political educational tasks is widely acknowledged.

In western Germany, the history of these memorials and places of remembrance is still very recent. With the exception of the memorials in the former concentration camps of Dachau and Bergen-Belsen that were inaugurated as far back as in 1965 and 1966, most of the others were not opened until the 1970s. There are several reasons for this. One decisive factor is certainly the growing interest, especially on the part of the younger generation, in the country's National Socialist past, which had previously been a taboo subject. Local initiatives were often taken in which young people, working with former internees and their organizations, militated in favour of the construction of places of remembrance. For the institutional promotion of the new memorials by the federal provinces, districts and local authorities or foundations, one important factor was the growing public awareness of the need for such testimonies beyond the comparatively small circle of dedicated advocates. The American television series *Holocaust* broadcast in the spring of 1979 played an important part here. Other

catalysts were the events organized to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Nazi seizure of power in 1933 and the fortieth anniversary of the end of the war two years later. The events held to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the 1938 November pogroms had a similar impact.

In the eastern part of Germany, formerly known as the German Democratic Republic, the background to the remembrance of the victims of National Socialism was totally different. In the official memorials at such places as Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen concentration camps, the main emphasis was on the 'anti-fascist struggle' of the Communist prisoners. The memorials that were built accordingly mirrored the ideological concepts of the East German state.

## **Nuremberg – the double burden of history**

Like few other German cities, Nuremberg is still confronted today with the historical heritage of the National Socialist period. Vast remains of the buildings on the former Reich Party Congress site still stand. They were built between 1933 and 1939 as a backdrop to the events in which the National Socialists staged popular participation during the Reich Party Congress. Here, the National Socialist movement celebrated its own glory in bombastic style, backed by the euphoria of enthusiastic throngs of people. Even today, the sheer scale of this megalomania testifies to the intention of the National Socialists to demonstrate their power to the masses, while at the same time giving the individual the impression of sharing that power. During the Reich Party Congresses, Germany and the whole world witnessed the show of strength of a regime which orchestrated



*A parade on the site of the Reich Party Congress in 1937.*

displays of military might, endless parades and military manoeuvres. By doing so, it openly put the people in the mood for war. Unlike the many memorials, which remind visitors of the Nazi terror and its victims in the former concentration camps, prisons and other such sites, this is not a place of horror. But the link with them is evident: the terrible seed sown in Nuremberg was to germinate elsewhere.

For decades, there were two obstacles to a rigorous interpretation of the history of the Reich Party Congress site and of its role in the Nazi apparatus of power and propaganda. Firstly – as was the case everywhere in Germany – the pragmatic attitude that had been adopted for decades to the stone testimonies of the National Socialist era needed to be overcome. An awareness had to be created that the former Reich Party Congress site was an eminently historical venue whose buildings should not just be used as depots, as a setting for all kinds of open-air events or as a site for the construction of a popular suburb. The

second obstacle to a specific historical process *in situ* resided in the understandable – if unjustified – fear of many in positions of responsibility that, despite all the educational efforts, the former Reich Party Congress site might become a place at which the ‘eternal followers of yesterday’ might celebrate what they regarded as Germany’s days of glory.

Since the mid-1970s, there has been a new tendency to place greater emphasis on the central role played by the Reich Party Congress site in German history. Particular importance attached here to the public interest which grew as personal memories of the Nazi era faded with the change of generations. The number of visitors to the site rose year by year, including many young people and thousands of tourists from Europe and the whole world. In 1985, an exhibition entitled *Fascination and Violence* was held in the Zeppelin Stand designed and built by Albert Speer between 1934 and 1937. Its purpose was to put forward strong and persuasive arguments against the stone testimonies

to the Nazi era and the spirit which they embody. Organized with modest municipal resources, the exhibition was an impressive testimony to the fact that there is no alternative to active information put across on the site itself.

Nevertheless, the presentation had to contend with many problems, such as its remote location on the extensive site. The fact that the exhibition is open only in the summer months because of the impossibility of heating the premises also proved highly prejudicial. Nevertheless, some 35,000 people visit this exhibition year after year. The total number of people who visit the Reich Party Congress building for its historical interest is estimated at around 100,000.

The past four years have brought far-reaching changes in the use of the former Reich Party Congress site in Nuremberg. The idea of a new 'Documentation Centre on the Reich Party Congress Site' (working title) developed by the Nuremberg city museums has met with general approval. Among politicians and the public at large, the conviction is now current that the historical burden of the former Reich Party Congress site is perhaps a unique opportunity. Where else would there be a comparable possibility of throwing critical light on the façade of the Third Reich, so giving the lie to new myths and legends? Where else would it be possible to analyse the 'motivation machinery' of National Socialism?

The purpose of the new project sketched out by the Nuremberg city museums is to create a new permanent exhibition open throughout the year in which the theme would be dealt with in an attractive contemporary manner on a floor space of well over 1,000m<sup>2</sup>. The intention would also be to create a Pedagogical



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Centre in which classes of schoolchildren and groups would have an opportunity to discuss this subject. The Nuremberg city museums have proposed as the site of this new exhibition the north wing of the Congress Hall, the gigantic building planned as the Congress Centre of the National Socialist Party for well over 50,000 people but never completed.

Backing for this project estimated to cost DM.9.5 million is as unanimous as it is convincing. All the democratic political parties have supported the project, as have the churches, the Central Council of German Jews, representatives of scientific circles and of the museums. A Board of Trustees set up by the Lord Mayor of Nuremberg with many prominent repre-

*The exhibition entitled Fascination and Violence held in 1985 in the Zeppelin Stand built by Albert Speer between 1934 and 1937.*



*The Congress Hall, planned as the Congress Centre of the National Socialist Party and never completed, is to become the new Documentation Centre.*

representatives of the political world and public opinion is lending its emphatic support to the project. Its concept is being refined with the help of a scientific council whose members include leading contemporary historians and museum specialists.

With this massive support, the difficult problem of financing has now largely been solved. The city and region of Nuremberg have made around DM.1.5 million available by way of initial financing – an impressive and unusual token of the resolve of local citizens not to pass over their National Socialist past in silence, but to deal with it in an enlightened manner. In the spring of 1998, the Free State of Bavaria contributed around DM.4 million to the financing, while a similar financial contribution from the federal authorities has been assured. What is more, the city of Nuremberg will accept responsibility for the current maintenance of the Documentation Centre. On the strength of the financial resources that have now been pledged, an architectural contest held in 1998 will elicit ideas for the

integration of the Documentation Centre into the north wing of the Congress Hall.

### **A chronological sweep**

The basic content of the planned permanent exhibition was presented in a report by Professor Gregor Schöllgen, which was adopted by the Scientific Council in July 1997. The author recommends that a broad chronological sweep should extend from the 1920s to the present day. The historical presentation will take in the ascent of the Nazi Party and the choice of Nuremberg as the venue for the Reich Party Congresses whose central role in the propaganda of the Third Reich will be analysed. The impact on the city of Nuremberg will be traced in all its aspects, down to the everyday life of the population.

The specific events that took place in Nuremberg will also be used as *Windows Opening on to the History of the Third Reich*. For example, after the presentation of the promulgation of the Nuremberg race laws during the Reich Party Congress of 1935, the panorama will be broadened to take in the criminal consequences of those laws. The path that led from the expropriation of the Jews and other minorities to the Holocaust will be traced out. Similarly, the progress from the big show manoeuvres of the German Wehrmacht in Nuremberg to the rearmament of the German Reich and finally to war and total defeat with its disastrous consequences, not least for the Germans themselves, will be illustrated. Nuremberg, too, had to pay a high price for the dubious honour of being the 'city of the Reich Party Congresses'. In forty-four bomb attacks, the city was razed to the ground. The Nuremberg war crimes tribunal also made it the centre for a legal investigation into National Socialist injustice.



In the meantime, a base of historical sources, which is innovative in many respects, has been compiled for the project. Following an appeal to the public for useful material, many highly revealing photographs, films and other original objects were donated for this purpose. In particular, the film material that has now become available gives a new insight into the Reich Party Congresses which contrasts with the pomp and glory of Nazi propaganda. It provides a much more routine view, 'a perspective from the eye of ordinary people'. The aim is to destroy the old and new legends and to reveal the 'mythical Reich Party Congresses' in their true light as cleverly staged events which abounded with tricks.

Some aspects of the historical collection are impressive. But individual exhibits are not the key to the Documentation Centre. The underlying intention is to tell the story of the Nuremberg Reich Party Congresses in an unobtrusive but effective manner with accompanying sound and film extracts, and also to show the people who created the site with its structures and took part in the vast events. Prominence is

given to the suffering of the concentration-camp prisoners and forced labourers who were obliged to make the building materials for the showpieces of National Socialism. Nazi propaganda, which was attuned to the symbolic impact of vast masses of human beings, is contrasted with the history experienced and suffered by the individual. A major campaign is currently underway to interview witnesses of those days and to make their statements accessible to visitors in a video presentation at the exhibition.

The planned Nuremberg Documentation Centre is not intended to be a museum in the conventional sense. It will be a site for a living confrontation with the history of National Socialism. The main target group is the young audience who often lack even the most elementary information on the Nazi past. The many educational activities, conferences, lectures, etc., associated with the permanent exhibition will provide a constant democratic discourse on the risks that exist today through political manipulation and the subordination of the individual to a dominant ideology. ■

# Forum

Museum International *continues its forum for current thinking on important museum questions in a slightly modified format. Readers are invited to reply to the questions at the end of the article so that we may publish their views on the most significant and perhaps controversial topics of the day.* Kenneth Hudson, Director of the European Museum Forum, which includes the European Museum of the Year Award, and author of fifty-three books on museums, social and industrial history and social linguistics, including the well-known Museums of Influence, will continue to act as our agent provocateur. He will set out the issues as he sees them, so as to elicit discussion and comment which we hope will provide a rich source of new ideas for the international museum community. Do join in the debate!

## **In today's world, are a museum's activities more important than its exhibitions?**

Is what goes on in the clubhouse and in the newspapers more important than the golf on the course outside? What does 'golf' really consist of? If it is a way of life, a set of attitudes, a substantial industry, then it is possible to argue that actually playing golf is only a small part of something much bigger and more significant called 'golf'. Much the same could be said about 'eating' and 'sleeping', where the range of commercially inspired behaviour extends far beyond the single core activity and, under some circumstances, can well exceed it in prestige and economic value. We have now reached the point at which this is true of many of the world's bigger museums, where the museum itself has become merely an

excuse for profitable commerce and for a variety of peripheral cultural and social enterprises, more or less connected with the museum itself. The museum world, one might say, is what increasingly counts, rather than the museum itself. How is one to decide, for instance, whether the Metropolitan Museum in New York is of greater significance than the commercial ventures that surround it? Perhaps the horse and the cart have changed places.

Yesterday's museums were very simple affairs. They consisted, basically, of buildings in which collections of objects were more or less effectively displayed. One toured these exhibitions and one was either interested or bored, according to the kind of person one was and the luck of the game. Under favourable conditions, one came out feeling better than one came in, but the opposite was equally possible. And then, at some point during the 1950s, two interlinked things began to happen. The first was that a small number of exceptionally energetic directors became interested in marketing and selling their museum and in regarding the people who came in as customers to be studied and pleased, rather than as mere visitors. The second aspect of the revolution was the enormous and quite rapid growth of what would at one time have been regarded as no more than fringe activities – shops, cafés and restaurants, 'educational' programmes and Friends' associations. It is fair to say that as a result of these changes in emphasis, what was once fringe has now almost become central. The museum has become the *raison d'être* of the activities surrounding it. One recalls the well-known American socialite who declared, 'I am parties.'

To describe and analyse the situation in which museums now find themselves is not to make accusations of treason towards an ideal. Museums are in the market place, where they have to compete with other types of organization for the time and money of their patrons. Such a situation did not exist fifty years ago, but it is all too real today and, in order to compete successfully, museums need money, which has to be extracted in one way or another from the pockets, wallets and handbags of their customers. There is no need to labour the point. One has only to visit, say, the Louvre in Paris, the Natural History Museum in London or the Wasa in Stockholm in order to sense immediately that one is in the middle of a commercial enterprise. The fact that the first could not exist without antiques and works of art, the second without animals and birds, and the third without a historic ship is undeniable. The museum is the cause of the commerce, just as the British royal family is the cause of the much sought-after and highly profitable tours of Buckingham Palace. One would not exist without the other.

It is all a question of balance and control. However it is run and whatever its type and size, a museum can justify itself only by being, in the broadest sense of the term, an educational institution, a place in which people enlarge their stock of knowledge and widen their understanding of the world around them. To the extent that museum 'activities' help and encourage this progress, they obviously deserve praise and support, but as soon as they show evidence of becoming bigger and more powerful than the museum itself they become dangerous and in need of being tailored down to size.

### Questions for readers

1. Does your museum have a shop, a café, a restaurant? If so, why? To make money for the museum? As a public relations exercise? Because your visitors expect it?
2. Do you have anything that could be described as an 'educational programme'? If so, what does it consist of?
3. Do you have an Association of Friends of the Museum? How important is it and what does it do?
4. What other activities does your museum organize? How do you judge their success?
5. Do you yourself regard your museum as more important than the activities surrounding it, or vice versa?

Please send your replies bearing the reference 'Forum–Museum Activities' to the Editor, *Museum International*, UNESCO, 7 place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP (France).

### Readers reply to Forum

*In Museum International No. 199, Kenneth Hudson asked 'Should permanent exhibitions be killed off as soon as possible?' Hermann Schäfer, Director of the Stiftung Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland in Bonn, replies.*

The core of our museum is composed of the main exhibition. The Haus der Geschichte displays on 4,000 m<sup>2</sup> contemporary German history from 1945 onwards. The exhibition traces the

history of both German states through the years of separation and also covers the history of unified Germany. The main exhibition operates on the basis of an 'open-end concept'. It tries to be as close to the present as possible. For us the term 'permanent exhibition' is misleading in two respects: first, the exhibition is perpetually improved on; second, as mentioned above, we cover the most recent events and are therefore endlessly working on the main exhibition which holds more than 7,000 objects. We are still looking for objects that will help the visitor understand more facets of historical reality. At the same time we try to incorporate the extensive findings of our visitor research into the improvement of our main exhibition.

The federal law which brought the Haus der Geschichte into existence rules that the main exhibition is to be improved and elaborated every five years. Our first task five years after opening in June 1994 will be to remodel the period from 1975 onwards. Thus, our oldest objects have been in place for slightly more than four years. And it is not likely that in the near future we will remove, for example, the first official car of German Chancellor Adenauer, a Mercedes.

During the last two years we organized five big temporary exhibitions in our main 650 m<sup>2</sup> space:

- *Vis-à-Vis. Germany–France*, 4 June to 20 September 1998.
- *Stepsisters? Women in East and West Germany*, 9 October 1997 to 8 March 1998.
- *By the Way. Photographs by American Soldiers in Germany*, 10 July to 31 August 1997.
- *Free Market Economy Versus Planned*

*Economy*, 14 March to 8 June 1997.

- *1936. The Olympic Games and National Socialism*, 14 November 1996 to 26 January 1997.

Five smaller temporary exhibitions were also organized.

Organizing temporary exhibitions is not considered a burden in the Haus der Geschichte; they are the icing on the cake. Although it is very hard work, which over a period of approximately two years will keep a lot of museum employees busy, we decided early on to put together teams for each individual exhibition project which are led by permanently employed curators who gather a group of temporary employees around them.

Even with more money the Haus der Geschichte would not change the basic layout of its programming, which features two or three major temporary exhibitions plus two smaller ones per year. Furthermore, we use temporary exhibitions as a means of improving our collections, for they allow us to concentrate on acquiring items that are closely connected to the relevant themes, thus benefiting the main exhibition as well. Temporary exhibitions also help us to accumulate further knowledge about specific historical subjects and, in an act of cross-fertilization, we then use this knowledge to improve the relevant sections in our main exhibition.

In conclusion, I will underline Kenneth Hudson's statement that there should be no permanent exhibition *per se*, that is to say, one with no change at all. Museums have the obligation to change their main exhibitions so as to offer visitors a broader perspective and varying insights into the museum's subject.

# **museum** international

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