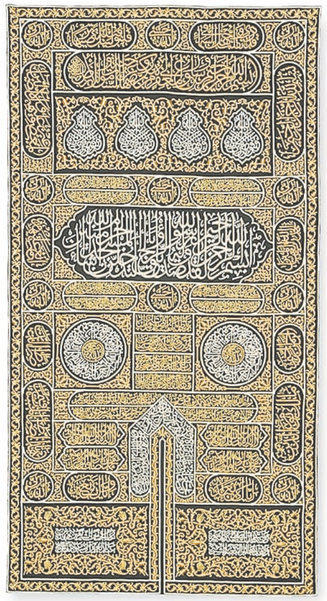
INSTITUTE OF ISMAILI STUDIES, LONDON

A leaf from the Blue Quran, considered one of the most exquisite versions of the holy book from which Islamic society develops its laws, rules of conduct and system of values (North Africa, 9th-10th century).

NASSAR D. KHALILI COLLECTION OF ISLAMIC ART, GENEVA

A mosque lamp made of glass with red, blue, green and yellow enamels and guilding, 33 cm high (Egypt, circa 1385).



NASSAR D. KHALILI COLLECTION OF ISLAMIC ART, GENEVA

The Sitarah (door) of the Kaaba (sanctuary) at Mecca, 256 cm by 136 cm, made of black felt embroidered in gold and silver thread (circa 1985).

In the beginning was the word

Under laws forbidding the depiction of either mankind or God, Islamic artists lifted the art of calligraphy to astonishing heights

NASSAR D. KHALILI COLLECTION OF ISLAMIC ART, GENEVA

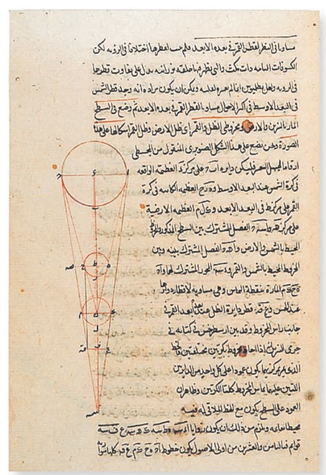
Ceramic tile (Iran, 13th century).

ADLER PLANETARIUM AND MUSEUM, CHICAGO

An astrolabe made by Ja'far ibn 'Umar ibn Dawlatshah of Kirman (Iran, 1388).

NASSAR D. KHALILI COLLECTION OF ISLAMIC ART, GENEVA

Two ceramic tiles (Pakistan, 17th or 18th century).



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The *Sharh al-Tadhkira*, a commentary on the astronomical work *Tadhkira* of the scientist Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (Iran, 1620).

THE SPIRIT OF ISLAM

Experiencing Islam through calligraphy

Museum of Anthropology, 6393 Northwest Marine Drive, Oct. 21 to May 12, 2002

By **MICHAEL SCOTT**

There was a time, not so many generations ago, when even schoolchildren knew the M-words of Islamic art: mosque, madrasa, minbar, mihrab and muqarnas. These were a set of beginner's keys, opening the sandalwood door to a world of Oriental splendour — a fabled, exotic, far-away world in which European eyes and ears were seduced by harem sights and caravanserai sounds. In late Victorian England, with the Empire winding arabesques around any number of Muslim states, the art, architecture and poetry of Islam were subjects of intense popularity.

A century later, our collective memory is still crowded with tales of Arabian nights and *Scheherazade*, with flying carpets and *jinns* in their stoppered bottles. But these are cartoon images of one of the world's most profound and compelling cultures. We may have forgotten our M-words when it comes to Islamic art, exchanging them in the past few weeks for 21st-century substitutes: mayhem, menace, martyrdom and misery.

After the events of Sept. 11, the world's perception of Islam was harrowed. World leaders were quick to draw a distinction between the Islamic faith as a whole, which preaches a message of perseverance and compassion, and the terrorist intentions of a handful of fanatics. But the shockwaves from the explosions in New York and Washington stirred up prejudice, just the same.

Through a transcendental coincidence in planning, the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia will unveil a new exhibition Oct. 20 that reaches out to remind us of the antiquity, depth and splendour of Islamic art.

Obviously the Museum of Anthropology and its Muslim advisors asked themselves whether the events of Sept. 11 made any difference to the timing or presentation of *The Spirit of Islam: Experiencing Islam through Calligraphy*.

The Museum of Civilization in Ottawa, meanwhile, reacted to the attacks by initially postponing a 60-work exhibition of contemporary art by Canadian artists of Arab heritage. After the prime minister lambasted the move, the museum reversed the decision and the exhibition opened Thursday. It faced criticism over a video installation by Vancouver artist Jayce Salloum in which Palestinian refugees urge the Arab world to unite behind the intifada.

"Museums often become these kinds of flash points," explains Ruth Phillips, the director of the Museum of Anthropology. She offers the Royal Ontario Museum's contentious 1989 show, *Into the Heart of Africa*, as another example. That exhibition, which was intended by its curator as a critique of colonial experience in Africa, was seen instead to reinforce racist stereotypes.

"One of the first things that went through my mind [Sept. 11] was: Thank heavens we're doing this exhibition," Phillips recalls. "We worried we might need more security. We worried that the exhibition posters might attract graffiti that would be insulting to the Muslim community. But we had no doubts about the exhibition itself.

"We went to our committee of advisers and everyone, everyone there was more determined than ever to go ahead."

"We never hesitated," says John Halani, a prominent member of Vancouver's Ismaili community and co-chair of the committee. The advisers insisted that the museum go ahead with its plans for posters and outdoor banners. Another member of the committee commented to Phillips that if the museum had not already had the exhibition in development it would certainly have had to start it, in the aftermath of Sept. 11.

"I wonder sometimes if perhaps there is not some divine plan at work with all of this," Phillips observes.

Performing its due diligence, the museum did seek advice from a security firm, but there will be no substantive change to its existing methods of protecting people and artifacts.

In any event, *The Spirit of Islam* will open to the public as scheduled tomorrow. "The show at the Canadian Museum of Civilization is defined by the notion of Arab," says Phillips. "Ours is defined by the notion of Islam. These are intersecting notions, not identical.

"Our exhibition is focusing on belief, not on politics."

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More than a year in the building, *The Spirit of Islam* is a soaring accomplishment, tying together many Muslim community groups and refashioning the museum itself as a tool to be wielded by interested outsiders. What has been accomplished in developing *The Spirit of Islam* is no less than a revolution in the way that a museum relates to its community.

The exhibition covers a wide range of materials, from profoundly religious items such as the black felt door (sitarah) that once hung across the entrance to the Ka'bah in Mecca, and a mosque lamp from Mameluke Egypt; to scientific and household items, to ceremonial armour from 19th-century Persia.

Forbidden by religious laws from depicting either mankind or God and his angels, Islamic artists lifted the art of calligraphy to astonishing heights. The elaborate loops and slashes of cursive Arabic form a major design element in almost all decorated surfaces.

The most dazzling example in this exhibition is a pair of pages from the legendary Blue Quran, drawn in gold on indigo-dyed antelope vellum somewhere in North Africa 1,100 years ago. To gaze upon these ancient pages, the blue as deep as a desert sky at night, is to glimpse something close to the divine heart of Islam.

The main elements of Islamic art are well covered in this collection of 23 objects, many of which are drawn from the Nasser Khalili Collection in Geneva, and the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London, Eng.: The dense layering of information (calligraphy on top of arabesque on top of geometric form); the intense colours, whether inlaid in gold and silver and bitumen, or fired on in shades of turquoise and cobalt; the algebraic complexity of proportion and balance.

We also see the close interplay of daily life and spirituality in Islamic cultures, where even mundane objects will be embellished with calligraphic verses from the Koran, or aphoristic poetry on sacred subjects.

"Few artistic expressions can be interpreted on so many levels as calligraphy," explains Carol Mayer, the museum's curator of ethnology and ceramics. "Through calligraphy, thoughts and ideas are given a concrete form that enhance their meaning and charge their message with a special power."

In the beginning was the Word, in Islam as in Christianity.

The idea for *The Spirit of Islam* began with the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum held here in 1997, when organizers commissioned an Islamic prayer space for visiting leaders. West Vancouver architect Farouk Noormohamed created a small structure whose design and ornamentation were intended to portray the "peacefulness, acceptance and kindness" of Islam. Like a tent in the limitless sweep of the desert, Noormohamed's tiny retreat provided a sanctuary in which to pray and contemplate one's place in the order of things.

After the conference, the prayer space remained on loan at the Museum of Anthropology, which used it as the centrepiece for a handful of public programs on Islamic architecture. "We had a very good response, and particularly from members of the local Muslim community," says Ruth Phillips. "Many of the people we spoke to said they would like to find a way of giving the general public a better understanding of Islamic belief, and [the new exhibition] grew from there."

Because of the sensitivities surrounding religious belief, the museum set up a panel of community advisors that includes members from a dozen Islamic groups, some of which were not on close terms with one another.

That panel is co-chaired by John Halani and museum staff member Jill Baird.

"It was difficult only in the sense that building consensus is often difficult," Halani says. "We left our differences aside. Everyone was willing to come and help."

As a measure of the panel's success, its members and their organizations have raised more than $200,000 toward the costs of mounting *The Spirit of Islam*. The museum secured a grant to create an exhibition web site and provided copious staff expertise, but the majority of the exhibition's cost came from the wider Muslim community. The panel and sub-committees focusing on education, fund raising, design and marketing meet once a week, adding up to hundreds of hours of participation over the course of the project.

"I feel that this is the beginning of something larger," Halani says. "It is certainly the first time in Canada that so many Muslim organizations have come together for a common goal. Probably the first time in North America.

"In the end we are all Muslim. There has never been an opportunity before to work like this in a cohesive manner."

Famously sectarian, Islam comprises a number of branches and sects, including Shi'a, Sunni, Ismaili, and Wahhabi. Whatever their differences, they each recognize Allah and his prophet, Mohammed, and turn toward Mecca, the geographical and spiritual heart of Islam, several times a day to offer prayers. That idea of the world's one billion Muslims simultaneously bent in prayer is powerfully summarized in the word *umma*, which signifies the entirety and singularity of Islam.

Over and over the people involved in creating *The Spirit of Islam* use the word, often in wondering tones at how much has been accomplished.

"We have learned so much in the process," says curator Mayer. "When you have a meeting that just stops because everyone at the table needs to stop for prayer, that definitely reminds you of your place in the wider world."

Michael Scott is the Vancouver Sun visual arts critic.

The five Ms of Islamic art and architecture

mosque — Muslim house of worship, from the Arabic word *masjid* meaning place of prostration

madrasa — a theological college or meeting place

minbar — a pulpit, usually of wood but sometimes of stone or decorated with glazed ceramic, from which the sermon is given during communal worship

mihrab — a niche or slab in a mosque that shows the direction of Mecca, from the Arabic word meaning praying-space

muqarnas — in a ceiling, serried tiers of niche-like architectural elements, sometimes likened to stalactite or honeycomb vaulting

— The Art and Architecture of Islam, by Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom, 1994.

NASSAR D. KHALILI COLLECTION OF ISLAMIC ART, GENEVA

Clay bowl slip-painted under a transparent glaze (Central Asia, 12th century).

NASSAR D. KHALILI COLLECTION OF ISLAMIC ART, GENEVA

Panel from a hizam (band) of calligraphy that ran around the Kaaba, made of satin embroidered in gold and silver wire and thread (Egypt, 19th century).

INSTITUTE OF ISMAILI STUDIES, LONDON

An album of four pages of calligraphic exercises, 16 cm by 9 cm per page (Iran, 18th century).