



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

## **Closing Address by His Highness the Aga Khan at the "Musée-Musées" Round Table Louvre Museum**

**17 October 2007**

Mr President  
Ladies and Gentlemen

Shortly after the announcement of our museum in Toronto, the aim of which is to present Islamic art in all its beauty and diversity, I had the immense pleasure of receiving Henri Loyrette's invitation to stage an exhibition here at the Louvre.

I thank Mr Loyrette and the management of the Louvre most warmly for organising this round table and inviting me to speak this evening. This is a completely new situation for me, since I have never previously taken part in this kind of initiative in France, much less at the Louvre. You will not be surprised if I confess that I feel as though I am sitting an extremely important school examination for which I have done no preparation at all! So I approach the task with deep trepidation!

When I was invited to talk to you about the future of the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto and the objects that will be on show there, I was asked to explain the significance of our exhibition and the role museums might play in improving understanding between East and West.

The meaning of our exhibition was certainly better illustrated by my brother Prince Ayn, and the director of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, Luis Monreal. I myself could not have explained the technicalities, but I think it is interesting to know about the framework within which our initiative is taking place, and it is to this issue that I shall turn now. It is, of course, risky to generalise about a world as diversified, complex and pluralistic as the Islamic world in this day and age. I shall allow myself to take that risk and attempt to explain to you some of the strategic aims we considered in relation to putting our collection on exhibition.

I believe that today the Islamic world's view of its own future is seriously affected by a divergent squint. It is a world split into two tendencies: on the one hand, modernisers and believers in progressive change, on the other, traditionalists who might even be described as hidebound. Both seek to determine future directions to be taken by the Ummah which will reinforce its identity, or rather its identities, while remaining rooted in a truth which is firmly Muslim. In practice, these two tendencies can be seen in the political domain in the differences between theocratic governance and the secular state; between the application of Sharia in all legal fields and the complete absence of Sharia or its application only in the domain of civil law; between economic and financial systems based on Sharia and systems that are essentially liberal and westernised; between religious education at every level and a national system with no reference at all to religion throughout the whole educational process, apart from the madrasa option for very young children.

In this context, we thought it essential, whichever choice Muslim populations may indicate to their governments, to clarify certain aspects of the history of Muslim civilisations in order that today's two main

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tendencies, modern and traditional, can base their ideas on historical realities and not on history that has been misunderstood or even manipulated.

Firstly, the 1,428 years of the Ummah embrace many civilisations and are therefore characterised by an astonishing pluralism. In particular, this geographic, ethnic, linguistic and religious pluralism has manifested itself at the most defining moments in the history of the Ummah, hence the objective of the Aga Khan collection, which is to highlight objects drawn from every region and every period, and created from every kind of material in the Muslim world.

The second great historical lesson to be learnt is that the Muslim world has always been wide open to every aspect of human existence. The sciences, society, art, the oceans, the environment and the cosmos have all contributed to the great moments in the history of Muslim civilisations. The Qur'an itself repeatedly recommends Muslims to become better educated in order better to understand God's creation. Our collection seeks to demonstrate the openness of Muslim civilisations to every aspect of human life, even going so far as to work in partnership with intellectual and artistic sources originating in other religions.

The third important observation we can make about the Ummah today is that the two main tendencies, traditional and modern, are trying to maintain, indeed to develop, their Islamic legitimacy. Loss of identity, anxiety about the risk of being caught up in a process of westernisation that is essentially Christian and is perceived as becoming less and less religious, are deep and very real concerns. Where the two tendencies diverge is on the question of how to maintain and strengthen this identity in the future.

Here, I would like to digress in order to illustrate how deep this loss of identity can be, even though it passes unrecognised until it is too late. Thirty years ago, I and a number of Muslim intellectuals met to ask ourselves an apparently simple but in reality extremely complex question: *"Has the Muslim world lost the ability to express itself in the field of architecture, a field admired and acknowledged as one of the most powerful manifestations of every great Muslim civilisation?"* The response was a unanimous 'Yes'. Since then, many efforts have been made to reverse the situation, including the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, but one of the causes was that, throughout the Ummah, none of the teachers in any of the schools of architecture had studied in their home countries. Without exception, every teacher of architecture in every school and university in the Muslim world had been trained abroad, without any reference whatsoever to the Muslim world. This is, by the way, one of the reasons we are pleased to have been able to include in our collection some documents of unique architectural interest.

For the populations of the Ummah, loss of identity is an unquestionable reality, as it is for all societies. Perhaps one of the keys for the Muslim world will be to perpetuate their cultures in the modern world by means of rediscovered ancient and newly inspired sources. The Muslim world's two main tendencies, traditional and modern, will both have a role to play but if one attempts to achieve exclusivity at the expense of the other, the consequences will be predictable and highly damaging.

The second issue about which I have been asked to talk to you is what the role of museums might be in promoting understanding between East and West. It is a huge question to which I shall not try to give a comprehensive response but I should nevertheless point out that the Muslim world, with its history and cultures, and indeed its different interpretations of Islam, is still little known in the West. Even today in secondary and even university education in the West, the study of the Muslim world is still a specialist subject. One example is how little the Muslim world features in the study of humanities in the West, where courses are essentially centred around Judeo-Christian civilisations.

This lack of knowledge is a dramatic reality which manifests itself in a particularly serious way in western democracies, since public opinion has difficulties judging national and international policy vis-à-vis the Muslim world. There are an infinite number of historical reasons for this, but perhaps there is also a fear of proselytisation. Be that as it may, the two worlds, Muslim and non-Muslim, Eastern and Western, must, as a matter of urgency, make a real effort to get to know one another, for I fear that what we have is not a



clash of civilisations, but a clash of ignorance on both sides. Insofar as civilisations manifest and express themselves through their art, museums have an essential role to play in teaching the two worlds to understand, respect and appreciate each other and ensuring that whole populations are given fresh opportunities to make contact with each other, using new, modern methods imaginatively and intelligently to bring about truly global communication.

Western museums, particularly those in Europe, have some extraordinary collections of Muslim art. Obviously, the Louvre and the Museum of Decorative Arts are the richest and I congratulate and thank them for the efforts they are making, with government backing, to fill the enormous void, a veritable black hole, which threatens us in this conflict of ignorance. Rest assured that you can fully count on us to play our part, however modest.

I shall finish by saying a few words specifically about our museum in Toronto. As you will have gathered, I am firmly convinced that better knowledge of the Muslim world can overcome distrust and therefore that city has been a strategic choice. While some North American museums have significant collections of Muslim art, there is no institution devoted to Islamic art. In building the museum in Toronto, we intend to introduce a new actor to the North American art scene. Its fundamental aim will be an educational one, to actively promote knowledge of Islamic arts and culture. What happens on that continent, culturally, economically and politically, cannot fail to have worldwide repercussions – which is why we thought it important that an institution capable of promoting understanding and tolerance should exist there.

The museum will also belong to the large Muslim population living in Canada and the USA. It will be a source of pride and identity for all these people, showing the inherent pluralism of Islam, not only in terms of religious interpretations but also of cultural and ethnic variety. Furthermore, the museum will show, beyond the notoriously politicised form of Islam which now tends to make headlines, Islam is in reality an open-minded, tolerant faith capable of adopting other people's cultures and languages and making them its own. There is no doubt whatsoever that the Muslims of North America will play an important role in the development of states and populations within the Ummah.