

From Mosque to Museum: the Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures, Be'er Sheva, Israel

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Abstract

The Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures is a major part of the conservation and development project of the old city of Be'er Sheva. Housed in a late period Ottoman mosque (built 1905-6), the museum was opened in 2012 after a long restoration project. As a curator, the author's role has been to establish the museum's permanent and temporary exhibitions as well as to modify the main hall and courtyard for the displays. Furthermore, conscious that the majority of the museum's potential audience are non-Muslim Israelis who may have misconceptions about Islam, the curatorial approach is to offer visitors a positive, engaging, and enlightening experience that will expose them to the richness and beauty of Islamic art and culture. Temporary exhibitions have been structured to incorporate themes familiar to non-Muslims, including carpets, ceramics, and calligraphy. Traditional Islamic works are presented alongside contemporary artworks, highlighting connections and resonances between Islamic and other cultures. The growing number of visitors suggests that this approach has, so far, been successful.

Keywords: Islamic art in Israel – curating Islamic art – Islamic art museum – Be'er Sheva – Be'er Sheva Islamic art museum

Introduction

The Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures is located in Be'er Sheva, the largest city in the Negev desert of southern Israel. Housed in a former mosque built in 1905-6 as part of a group of Ottoman public buildings (Al-Aref 2000), the museum is a major part of the conservation and development project of the old city of Be'er Sheva.

In 1948, following the establishment of the state of Israel, the building ceased to function as a mosque. In 1953, the local municipality decided to transform the building into a museum of archaeology and ethnography. From 2008 to 2010, the building underwent a process of major conservation and restoration. In 2012, the newly refurbished building was opened as the Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures.

Built in the great tradition of Ottoman architecture, the former mosque features an open courtyard, enclosed prayer hall with a central dome, decorative windows that flood the rooms with natural light and a tall minaret with a balcony. Small compared to its famous counterparts in Istanbul, the mosque was constructed in local limestone, its scale and modest décor in keeping with other Ottoman buildings in Palestine at the time.

Development of the Museum: Guiding Principles

As curator, my role was to modify the main hall and courtyard, and to conceive and implement the museum's exhibitions. The museum offers the public two exhibitions: a permanent exhibition located in the courtyard, which displays archaeological finds from the region's Muslim period; and temporary exhibitions housed in the main hall, which change every year. My role has been especially challenging since many of the museum's visitors are non-Muslim Israelis who may have misconceptions about Islam. As such, my main goal was to provide visitors with a positive, enriching and engaging experience that exposes them to the diversity and beauty of Islamic art and culture. To achieve this I focused on four guiding principles: first, to make the historic building the focal point of the museum with an emphasis on its architectural elements and historical background. Second, to use the exhibitions to acquaint non-Muslim visitors with aspects of Islamic art and culture through themes with which they are familiar from their everyday lives. Third, to display palpable cross-cultural relationships between Islamic and non-Muslim cultures. And finally, to incorporate contemporary interpretations of traditional Islamic themes in the exhibitions.

The Building as a Focal Point

To achieve the first guiding principle – to make the building the main focal point of the museum – both the temporary exhibitions in the main hall and the permanent exhibition in the courtyard were designed and planned to highlight the building's unique features.

In the main hall, the primary purpose was to ensure the right environmental conditions in which to display the artefacts while at the same time highlighting the building's architectural elements. This was achieved by covering the internal walls of the main hall with translucent screens in a geometric pattern inspired by traditional Islamic design. Covering everything except the areas around the mihrab and the entrances, the screens allow in diffused daylight while emphasizing the building's architectural elements. In addition, the display cases and stands were likewise designed so as not to

conceal architectural elements. Since it is impossible to hang exhibits on the building's old walls, the display items are without exception freestanding (fig.1).



Figure 1. Main hall: Exhibition view of *Knots*

The first exhibition, *Knots*, was devoted to Islamic carpets which were displayed on 30-centimetre-high platforms. Placing the carpets on these platforms served two purposes: the walls of the building were not concealed and the carpets were displayed in a way which is similar to their original position, close to the floor.

For the second exhibition, *From Iznik to Jerusalem - Ceramics in Cross-Cultural Encounters*, we built freestanding display cases made of glass and metal which allowed the exhibits to be viewed from all sides. Again, these display cases ensured that the mosque's unique architectural elements were not concealed while providing secure places for the fragile ceramic pieces.

When transforming the mosque into a museum, the building's courtyard, which houses the permanent exhibition, was thoughtfully designed. The project was inspired by the courtyards of Islamic public buildings that usually encompass an orchard, fragrant plants and fountains. In consultation with a landscape gardener, a few citrus trees, jasmine bushes and a fountain were installed (fig.2).



Figure 2. The museum's courtyard

In order to emphasize the historical significance of the building, the museum produced a brochure and a number of user-friendly worksheets. The brochure includes information about the building's history, while the worksheets intend to educate children about its architectural elements and their relation to the permanent exhibition.

Engaging Non-Muslim Visitors

The second guiding principle – familiarizing non-Muslim visitors with Islamic art and culture – was achieved by choosing themes which are fairly well known to most visitors who live in our region such as carpets, ceramics and calligraphy.

The first exhibition, *Knots*, was devoted to the role of carpets in Islamic and Near Eastern culture. This theme is familiar to most non-Muslim visitors since many have a Persian or Turkish carpet in their homes or know someone who does. Among the items on display were prayer rugs, garden carpets, and medallion carpets from Iran, Turkey, the Caucasus, Palestine and Israel, dating from the eighteenth to the twenty-first centuries.

The second exhibition, *From Iznik to Jerusalem - Ceramics in Cross-Cultural Encounters*, explored one particular aspect of Islamic ceramics. We decided to focus on the intercultural encounter between the Turkish ceramic tradition and its Armenian counterpart in Jerusalem; and their affinity with Chinese ceramic art. The exhibition traced the history of the Armenian ceramic tradition from Turkey to Jerusalem (Lane 1957; Atasoy and Raby 2008; Kenaan-Kedar 2003; St. Laurent and Riedlmayer 1993). Israelis who visit Jerusalem's Old City markets would be familiar with the Armenian ceramics sold in souvenir shops and factory outlets, but most are unaware that Armenian ceramics have their origins in Anatolia.

The third exhibition, *Maktub - Traditional and Contemporary Calligraphy between East and West*, explored the wealth of uses of paper in Islamic lands, with a focus on Arabic calligraphy - one of the foundations of Islamic art and culture. While most Israelis are familiar with Arabic calligraphy and may know that paper was invented around 2,000 years ago in China, they might not know that it was the Islamic world that spread the knowledge of paper worldwide. The exhibition depicted the connection between the availability of paper in the Islamic world and its influence on Islamic arts in general and on Arabic calligraphy in particular (Bloom 2000, 2001; Hannawi 2012).

Cross-Cultural Relationships

The third guiding principle is presenting cross-cultural relationships between the Islamic world and non-Muslim cultures. To achieve this principle, each exhibition included works of art from non-Muslim cultures, predominately European or Far Eastern, which reflect interactions with the Islamic world.

In the first exhibition, *Knots*, alongside traditional Oriental carpets, a still-life painting which depicts an Oriental carpet covering a table was displayed. It was painted by the Dutch artist Heyman Dullaert (1636-1684), a student of Rembrandt. In addition, we prepared a digital presentation featuring European works of art from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries in which holy or noble figures are depicted standing on Oriental carpets (The digital presentation was based on research presented in Gantzhorn 1998). Both exhibits reflect historical trade relations between the Islamic world and European countries. The trade included the transfer and exchange of luxury items such as Oriental carpets, resulting in reciprocal intercultural influences.

The second exhibition, *From Iznik to Jerusalem - Ceramics in Cross-Cultural Encounters*, presented the cross-cultural relationship between the Islamic world and China. Interaction between the Chinese and Islamic cultures began as early as the 7th century. Chinese ceramics were extensively imported to the Muslim world, ultimately reaching the Ottoman court. Ceramic artists from Iznik and Kutahya were deeply influenced by ceramic vessels from the Yuan and Ming dynasties, and inspired by the flowers, grape clusters, and clouds which were painted in blue on a white background under a transparent glaze. In later days the Chinese motifs underwent a process of accommodation to Islamic art. Chinese stylized clouds, for example, became symmetrical arabesques. Lotus flowers, which were unknown in Anatolia, became stylized and were added to local Anatolian vegetal motifs (Lane 1957, 263–66). To emphasize the cross-cultural exchange and China's palpable influence on the Muslim world, we placed blue and white Ottoman pottery alongside blue and white Chinese ceramic vessels from the Ming and Qing dynasties.

The third exhibition, *Maktub - Traditional and Contemporary Calligraphy between East and West*, displayed one of the world's earliest Qur'ans printed in Arabic, dating back to 1694. Produced by Abraham Hinckelmann, a Protestant theologian and collector of Oriental texts from Hamburg, the Qur'an was printed using carved woodblocks and inked in two pigments, red and black, with a prologue added by Hinckelmann in Latin. Although the Islamic world spread the knowledge of papermaking from China to Europe, it did not participate in the European printing revolution launched by Johannes Gutenberg in the fifteenth century. Therefore, the complete Qur'an was printed in Europe before it was printed in the Islamic lands.

Contemporary Art Incorporating Islamic Motifs

The final guiding principle – presenting contemporary interpretations of traditional Islamic themes – was achieved by all the exhibitions displaying contemporary art alongside traditional Islamic artwork.

The first exhibition, *Knots*, displayed a large garden carpet, estimated as dating from the late eighteenth-century, beside a video installation by Nevet Yitzhak. The garden carpet, depicting four star-shaped pools seen from above, as well as stylized flowers, birds and bees, was woven in the eastern Caucasian province of Dagestan. The video installation *Sun on the Red Sea* was inspired by a traditional garden carpet that belonged to the artist's grandmother. This colourful Persian garden carpet was photographed in black and white to look like gray plaster. In the video the patterns of the original carpet are transformed into a kind of computer game, disrupting the harmony and order that are symbolized by the garden carpet, and replacing them with a sense of disorder and confusion.

The second exhibition, *From Iznik to Jerusalem - Ceramics in Cross-Cultural Encounters*, presented the works of two contemporary ceramic artists, Martha Rieger and Ekrem Yazici, who produced their artwork in China's 'porcelain capital', Jingdezhen. Their ceramic works are inspired by Chinese ceramics in the same way as Turkish ceramic artists were influenced by it centuries earlier. Yazici, a native-born Turk, incorporates classic Muslim motifs and traditional Chinese subjects and styles into his work. His ceramic dishes displayed in the exhibition are decorated with Muslim calligraphy featuring delicate Chinese blossoms. In her work, *Blue and White Made in China*, Martha Rieger, an Israeli ceramic artist born in Brazil, combines Western European ceramic traditions with Chinese production techniques, style and ornamentation to produce large ceramic eggs. To achieve this she traveled to a traditional Chinese workshop in Jingdezhen, a journey which is documented and digitally presented in the exhibition.

In the third exhibition, *Maktub - Traditional and Contemporary Calligraphy between East and West*, contemporary works offer new interpretations of traditional calligraphy. For example, Kutluğ Ataman's video installation entitled 'Animated Words' is presented alongside exhibits depicting traditional pictorial writing where calligraphy is used to draw pictures. This confluence of script and image is an important motif in traditional Arabic calligraphy. The pictorial writing features Arabic text stylistically shaped to portray animals and buildings. In Ataman's work, the Turkish word *hiç*, which means "never" or "nothing," is written in Ottoman Turkish letters. The word moves in a circular pattern and turns into a flower. For viewers familiar with Arabic script but who cannot read Ottoman Turkish, the forms created from the script are confusing. As the viewer tries to follow the transforming script, the Turkish word and meaning remain indecipherable, as does the connection between the word and the forms the word create. Ataman's works transport the viewer from an attempt to decipher the written language and its meaning to treating the written word as a visual image.

Conclusion

The Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures aims to present the richness and beauty of Islamic art and culture while offering visitors an engaging educational experience. This is achieved through the combination of its unique space (a former mosque) and the exhibitions it displays. The curatorial plan gives prominence to the historic building, with an emphasis on its history and architecture. The permanent and temporary exhibitions focus on major themes of Islamic art and culture, presenting these traditional artworks alongside works of art from non-Muslim cultures, as well as contemporary artworks.

Given the political environment in Israel, it was not easy to establish a museum that focuses on Islamic art and culture. The growing number of visitors over the past years encourages us to continue making the museum a place that brings people together, overcoming differences and conflicts.

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