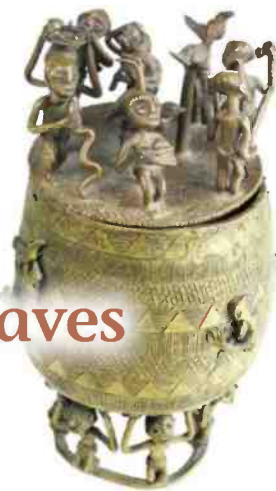


## Gold, salt and slaves

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### ART REVIEW

• By HAGAY HACOHEN

The newly renovated mosque in the old town of Beersheba now hosts the Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures, where cultural ties between West Africa and the Islamic World are shown.

The fountains lent by Arman Darian to the museum gently flow as the scent of jasmine invites the visitor to enjoy the courtyard of the refurbished mosque and relax before entering "Gold Road Encounters," a unique exhibition about the contact points between Islamic cultures and West African ones.

"The first thing we present to the public is the mosque," museum curator Dr. Sharon Laor-Sirak told me. The original 1906 building was lovingly restored and trees are now watered in the courtyard to give visitors a chance to experience it as a refuge from urban life and heat.

"My concept is that Islamic art did not vanish when the British Mandate ended," Laor-Sirak explained, "which is why these two modern fountains were selected to represent contemporary art that employs the principles of Islamic art."

The late scholar Oleg Grabar championed the view one does not need to be a Muslim to create Islamic art. Interestingly, an oral Bedouin history collected by Sasson Bar-Zvi points to the fact the original mosque was built by a Christian builder.

The pleasant courtyard contains archeological findings from across the country that span the centuries during which this land was a part of the larger Islamic world. They include a tombstone written in Kufic script, carved marble and a mosaic floor. Perhaps unknown to the average visitor, this entire space is the result of a 2011 High Court ruling that decided against Bedouin demands to return the building to its original religious function. While the city of Beersheba requested the site be used for an archeological museum, the court decreed it would be used to honor Islamic and Near Eastern cultures.

In "Gold Road Encounters" a Fatimid gold hoard from the early 12<sup>th</sup> century discovered in Caesarea is used to tell the complex relationship between Islamic kings and traders and African rulers and craftsman.

The exhibition space is wonderfully designed. On the right is the gold treasure found here and the various objects used in gold trade. They include a *kuduwo*, a brass container used to store the *kra*, or life force, of their owners in the Akan kingdoms that once held gold dust. They also include a variety of well-made figures used to weight gold.

To the left, we see crocodile masks used by the Grebo people in what is now Liberia during their secret initiations. Various masks, such as a wisdom mask used by the We people and a protection mask, are included in the exhibi-



A GHANAIAN KUDUWO (gold dust container), 17th to 19th century. (Israel Museum)

tion thanks to the generosity of Dina and Michael Weiss. Unlike other collections, which are tainted by their complex relationship to colonial powers and violence, this collection is presented with the approval of the original cultures on condition it represents their respective cultures in a dignified manner.

The collection includes Islamic items, such as a 19<sup>th</sup> century Quran from Timbuktu, and non-Islamic items, such as a 1951 granary door made by the Dogon people of Mali. Some items show how interacting cultures formed something new, like a hunting shirt with Koranic verses to protect the hunter or a box mask (Sibondel) headdress made by the Baga people that includes al-Buraq (the winged animal the prophet of Islam used to reach Jerusalem).

Also noteworthy are the various masks from secret African societies (for men and women) used to educate the young. The mouth is usually depicted as a small narrow line, indicating one does not reveal secrets to outsiders.

There is a tendency in the West to see Africa as a footnote to a European-focused story. If Pablo Picasso was inspired by Grebo masks, for example, they become valuable to understand cubism. If the blues inspire people like Bob Dylan and Eric Clapton, the Griot musicians from West Africa become important. One of the best things about this exhibition, I think, is that it offers the casual visitor a peek into the splendor (and yes, otherness), of civilizations.

"Gold Road Encounters" will be shown until July 16, 2022 at the Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures at 60 Ha'atzmaut St in Beersheba.

Phone (08) 622-6929, Site: [www.ine-museum.org.il](http://www.ine-museum.org.il) Opening Hours: Monday, Tuesday and Thursday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesday from noon to 7 p.m. and Friday and Saturday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. No admission price stated.