

# Catching up on Islamic art



The Ardabil Carpet c1539-40, commissioned as one of a pair by Shah Tahmasp of Iran, inset and in the Jameel Gallery installation

**Western art museums are scrambling to attract more audiences for Islamic art, or just to increase displays aimed at building up public 'understanding' of Islamic cultures and civilisations, but is that enough? Arab Banker looks at the scene**

To those visiting London on and off for business or tourism (though less and less so of the latter), this year's array of events in the world of art would appear to have justified the city's reputation as the capital of the Arab/Islamic world. Although events such as 9/11 and 7/7 have given that reputation a sadly ironic twist, London commands attention as a confluence of cultures, many of those from the Middle East, as evidenced by its growing communities that bear their own nicknames, such as *Mini-Beirut* (Edgware Road) and *Mini-Iran* (High Street Kensington). This year the city drew increasing numbers of Middle Easterners to itself because of two major art events, the British Museum's *Word into Art* exhibition and associated lectures and conferences and the opening of the Victoria and Albert Museum's new Jameel Gallery of Islamic art and its permanent exhibition.

The V&A is a latecomer in the current scramble to catch up on Islamic art — both to cater for a domestic British Muslim audience on a quest for its inheritance and for numerous visitors from the MENA region, other European countries, North America and beyond. The *Word into Art* show was a 'radical' departure for the British Museum, even though it confined itself to the rather safe and generally less politicised contemporary art employing calligraphy as the chief medium of expression. It stayed well clear of what artists of today see as more cutting edge and provocative work that doesn't flinch from contributing to the myriad debates in their midst — from Palestine, Iraq, Islam and identity to the West's 'war on terror.'

Be that as it may, *Word into Art* introduced to the BM a whole raft of new audiences — from British and European Muslims to MENA visitors — many of whom tend to dismiss the venue as an

Victoria and Albert Museum



Detail of the minbar of Sultan Qa'itbay, showing the double doors that give access to the stairway. Egypt (probably Cairo), 1468-96

outpost of the Establishment and a custodian of colonial loot. *Word into Art* also served a welcome educational purpose, opening up for the BM's regular clientèle almost entirely new worlds, otherwise painted in unwholesome colours by the persistent prejudices of a wide body of Britain's print and electronic media.

Whether any of this good work will go towards fundamental shifts in attitudes leading to significant political change is yet to be seen, however. The British Museum has had a modest Islamic Gallery, funded by a bequest from sinologist John Addis, since the 1990s. It is a poor cousin to the museum's resplendent and much larger Joseph Hotung Gallery of Oriental (mostly Buddhist and Chinese) Antiquities, funded by philanthropy from overseas. In the event it all boils down to who funds what and the V&A has been lucky in securing generous amounts of cash for its brand new gallery, albeit from non-British sources.

The Jameel Gallery was made possible by generous support from Saudi Arabia's Jameel family and is dedicated to the memory of Mr Abdul Latif Jameel, the late founder of the Abdul Latif Jameel Group, and his wife Nafisa, by Mohammed Abdul Latif Jameel, their son. Funding for *Word into Art* also came largely from non-British sources in the Gulf. So, while these institutions are earning plaudits for their magnificent displays of Arab/Islamic art, it is important to note that Britain's own public funding in these endeavours remains small.

### Money well spent

The Jameel Gallery demonstrates how money can be well spent on a worthy cause. The V&A's old display of the gallery's star items, such as the Ardabil carpet, and the minbar, was heralded by a white-on-blue banner that simply announced 'Islam.' Today such a simple or stark (take your pick) labelling would be like waving a red rag to the bull — collectively many amongst western audiences, either inevitably conditioned by a relentless mass media onslaught on the faith and its practitioners or curious enough to come and seek interconnections between their daily experience and history of Islam and its culture and art.

It is early days yet for an understanding of all things Islamic to materialise in the West in a constructive manner, a manner

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*Hands of Fatima, 1989, Laila Shawa (Palestine/UK), oil and acrylic on canvas*



in which concrete results can be anticipated on the political level. An example of how excruciatingly slowly the debate is moving forward, if at all, was glimpsed in a piece that Philip Hensher wrote recently in *The Guardian* newspaper. "One art critic who visited the gallery during the two minutes' silence in memory of the victims of London's July 7 bombings hoped that 'all those lovely, beautifully displayed objects could help to heal society's fault lines.'" Hensher opines, "The redemptive narrative implicit in this is obvious. The sort of Islamic culture that ends in twisted metal and blood splattered across London façades is cancelled out by its ancestral beauty..." and so on.

The point not taken still is that no amount of 'interest in Islamic culture' can substitute for an interest in constructive change where it matters — on the political and military fronts in Palestine, Iraq and beyond.

Another mistake often committed and evident in western interpretations of Islamic art, culture and society is the tendency to separate the old from the new, the contemporary from the historical. Surprisingly, in an otherwise thoughtful piece, Hensher falls for that, too, when he chooses to identify "a museum culture and a culture of dissidence" — including art produced today and showcased in the British Museum's *Word into Art* or other

public and private displays, some available only outside the Arab world. Why is it that such a separation would be hard to argue for in the context of western art when, for example, visiting Tate Britain or Tate Modern, the Louvre and the Centre Pompidou? Why indeed such a discourse is absent from the mainstream dissection of modern western art?

Thankfully, it is unlikely that many visitors to the V&A's Gallery would care. In that respect it is important to see these developments as a celebration of the tiny minority that, from time to time, manages to effect change with long-term consequences. On a recent afternoon, while contemplating the view in the Jameel gallery, I was ambushed by a noisy horde — dozens of British Asian, apparently Muslim, school children with notebooks in their hands and mostly white teachers in their tow.

No doubt there have been other school tours of the gallery by children and adults with no direct ancestral links with the objects on display, so that aspect of the gallery's arrival alone is a welcome step in the right direction. None of this, alas, takes us a huge distance away from the fact that no amount of art-gazing can dispel the problems that remain in our midst and require intelligent and urgent response.

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