

Qatar's Museum of Islamic Art: Despite Flaws, a House of Masterpieces

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International Herald Tribune

Friday, December 5, 2008

DOHA, Qatar: Few can boast of having created from scratch a museum that deals with the arts of the past, no matter from what culture. This feat pulled off within a couple of decades or so by the ruling family of Qatar was revealed this week as the Museum of Islamic Art opened its doors to the public.

Like any Utopian realization, this one displays some remarkable features matched by equally blatant weaknesses. The new building designed by I.M. Pei was meant to be “an architectural gem, home to a thousand treasures,” as posters along avenues leading to the museum claim. Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder as the saying goes, and not all beholders will be overwhelmed by the geometrical volumes that seemed to be heaped upon one another when seen from a distance.

Once inside, visitors may wonder why little attention has been given to some basic requirements for the display of objets d’art. Daylight, which would have been of immense benefit to ceramics and silver-inlaid brass wares, has been largely shunned in a land where it is often glorious.

Had artificial lighting been devised with greater sensitivity for the objects, this might be forgiven. But apparently someone forgot to warn those who installed the lighting equipment that directional light aimed from high up in the ceiling on sensational candlesticks from Iraq, Iran and Syria would cause nasty reflections, leaving other areas barely discernible.

The contrast with a few objects displayed in individual cases properly lit where their splendor duly comes out, as is the case with a 10th-century bronze animal from Arab Spain, makes these elementary mistakes all the more irksome. In fairness to the new museum, such mishaps are not uncommon in world-famous, long-established institutions. The Louvre exhibition of treasures from Qatar two years ago suffered from similar deficiencies.

These mistakes are compounded by the larger problem of the overall distribution of the art which does not follow any discernible purpose.

Visitors stepping into one of the galleries where the objects are set in individual cases several steps apart may be forgiven if they fail to detect any logic in the arrangement - there is none. A very beautiful bowl with blue lettering on the ivory ground and a label assigning it to 10th-century Iraq sits a short distance away from a 10th-century bronze animal from Arab Spain described as a fountainhead. A 16th-century decanter (not a “water bottle”) from the Turkish city of Iznik is there, too, and as they approach a corner of the room, the more diligent art lovers may spot an important astrolabe from Iran signed in 374 of the Islamic calendar (984-985 A.D.) by Hamid ibn al-Khizr al-Khujandi. With luck, they may even catch sight in a wall vitrine of an extraordinary flask of deep blue glass decorated in gold with a stylized pomegranate tree and parrots that is tentatively attributed to Syria.

If confined to one room, the random grouping might conceivably be justified as an anthology of stunning pieces, each to be admired in isolation. But this goes on endlessly.

In the room next to this one, the theme of “patterns” is supposed to justify the selection. Extremely fine revetment tiles from Iznik dating from the 1580s are visible on a wall. Nearby, the opening page of a Moghul manuscript with a magnificent rosette is said to have formed part of an album put together for the emperor of Hindustan, Shah Jahan. The label, alas, omits to specify for the layman’s benefit that the page is cropped on all sides, which drastically alters its balance.

Further on, a rare bowl from 15th-century Iran with turquoise cloud bands and lotus blossoms on black ground sits in a case on its own. No aesthetic link connects any of the above.

What could have led to the decision of setting side by side in a central vitrine an ivory oliphant from 12th-

century Italy (perhaps Sicily, the label speculates), and a 17th-century tinned copper bowl from Iran with a date possibly to be read 1[0]89 (1678-1679 AD), is puzzling.

If the reason is simply the presence of a hunting scene (naturally involving animals) on the Iranian bowl and of animal effigies carved in sunken relief on the oliphant, the parallel is hardly illuminating. This is the equivalent of displaying together a 12th-century Romanesque sculptural group from France and a 17th-century picture by Rubens on the grounds that both represent Mary and the infant Jesus.

Such lack of visual coherence is the inevitable consequence of the concept of “Islamic art” that underpins the display. This is a European construct of the 19th century that gained wide acceptance following a display of Les Arts Musulmans at the old Trocadero palace in Paris during the 1889 Exposition Universelle. The idea of “Islamic art” has even less substance than the notion of “Christian art” from the British Isles to Germany to Russia during the 1000 years separating the reigns of Charlemagne and Queen Victoria might have.

Should any art historians declare themselves competent to deal with paintings, artifacts or monuments created across Europe during that period, not many would take them seriously, and were a museum director to prepare haphazardly a similar artistic concoction, he would not last long in the job.

Yet that is roughly how the Western art world, academic or not, approaches the lands where Islam prevails. Never mind that the sundry cultures are more diverse taken as a whole than those of Europe.

The reasons for the enduring myth are many. In the West, museums stick to the notion of “Islamic art” because they lack the money, the space or the competencies required to set up separate Arab, Iranian, or Turkish departments. Similar lack of financial and/or human resources lead universities to run “Islamic departments.”

In Islamic countries, the situation varies. The general tendency to import wholesale Western European concepts and fashions, from clothes to constitutional matters, paved the way for the adoption of the “Islamic art” myth. Ironically, the anachronistic phrase translated from European languages would have been incomprehensible in earlier times. Humans alone can be “Muslims,” i.e. entrust themselves unto God, inert things cannot - even if the qualifier is changed to “Islamic.” The myth is particularly popular in those parts of the Muslim world that have only made a modest contribution to art because by using an all-encompassing qualifier, they feel that they, too, somehow own the art of the more powerful cultures.

This overall confusion has a corollary - inadequate scholarship, regrettably reflected in easily half the labels that require urgent revision. Many do not yield basic information that can be culled merely by glancing at the inscriptions painted on the pottery or inlaid in gold on the brass vessels and candlesticks.

Nonspecialists might be interested to learn that the ceramic bowl with blue lettering ascribed to “Iraq (probably Basra)” is signed. The line reads in Arabic mimma ‘amala S[a]lih,” “made by S[a]lih.” It says a lot about the status of artists - and the fame of some - that the sole decoration is confined to that signature. Add in passing that the bowls with such blue lettering on ivory ground that have appeared in the market are traceable to Iranian, not Iraqi, sources. This, added to various bowls recovered from archaeological excavations across Iran, carries greater weight than the shards excavated in Samarra, the Iraqi city that was briefly a caliphal capital where goods arrived from all over the world.

It would be of even greater interest to visitors who are not specialists in Arabic epigraphy to be told that the fantastic Syrian brass incense burner inlaid with silver and gold carries the titles and names of the great Mamluk Sultan of Syria and Egypt, al Malik an-Nasir Muhammad ibn Qalawun.

On the third floor, a candlestick of extraordinary importance is likewise inscribed with the titles and names of a ruler, Sheykh Abu Eshaq, the Injuid Sultan of the southern Iranian region of Fars, who reigned from 1341-1356. This not only makes the bronze piece decorated with miniature-like court scenes a royal object, it also tells us that it was made in the capital of the Sultanate, Shiraz. The label is again silent on these matters.

Curiously, the very names of the objects in English and Arabic are often wrongly stated. Truncated

conical pottery bowls are dubbed “dish” in English and “sultaniyya” in Arabic, not the classical word, which is ka’s or sometimes jam.

Most regrettably, no special emphasis is laid on some of the most important objects in the collection. A group of brass pieces from 13th-century Iraq, including two pairs of stunning door knockers, and some unique candlesticks, can be seen for the most part on the third floor. Only one, decorated with dazzling silver-inlaid scrollwork, and assigned to Baghdad, is in a main gallery on the first floor. Trade sources report that these all left a Shiite shrine on the outskirts of Baghdad in the days of Saddam Hussein. Later, they passed into the hands of a great Kuwait collector, the late Jasem al-Homaizi, whose objects were acquired by Qatar.

There are several more objects of cardinal importance unmatched in most of the world’s museums. Two velvet panels illustrating wine drinking at the Safavid court of late-16th-century Iran are miraculously well preserved.

If only for these masterpieces, anyone who has a chance should pay a visit to this imperfect museum with many unforgettable works of art.



A 15th-century bowl from Iran. (Museum of Islamic Art, Doha)