

review
the

72.8m

Amount, in US dollars, that the Qatari royal family paid for a Mark Rothko painting in 2007



IM Pei travelled the world seeking "the heart of Islamic architecture" to underpin his design for Doha's Museum of Islamic Art. He found his inspiration in the 13th century ablution fountain at Cairo's Ahmad ibn Tulun mosque, whose austere geometry presents a surprisingly perfect match for the minimalist aesthetic of Pei's own work. Hassan Ammar / AP Photo

Collection of secrets

Doha's new Museum of Islamic Art, brilliantly designed by IM Pei, offers a first glimpse of the expansive, closely-guarded art holdings of Qatari leaders. Carol Kino visits 'the last curiosity cabinet in the world'

For more than 20 years Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani and the rest of the royal family of Qatar have attracted the attention of the international art world through their widespread collecting – often beating the world's great museums at auction and paying top dollar for everything from contemporary art to Islamic and western antiquities.

Although there have been many rumours about the royal family's holdings, not much is known about them for certain. And though there has been plenty of speculation about the many museums Qatar may build, there is little on record about their plans. According to Roger Mandle, the recently-appointed executive director of the Qatar Museums Authority, who assumed his post in July, this is just how the Al Thanis like it. "The thing I have to emphasise is that the chair of our board [Sheikha Mayassa Bint Hamad Al Thani, the Emir's daughter] is not very comfortable with having lots of information or speculation raised about future institutions," Mandle said in a recent phone interview.

So when Qatar's first venture, the Museum of Islamic Art, opened in Doha last month, the western art world flocked there to get a glimpse of their holdings first-hand, and to get a sense of coming projects. If this venture is any indication, the future looks quite rosy.

To begin with, the building itself is glorious – the work of IM Pei, who was lured out of semi-retirement in New York for the occasion. Early on in the design process, Pei travelled the world seeking "the heart of Islamic architecture," as he is quoted in the museum's catalogue. He found it in the 13th century ablution fountain at Cairo's Ahmad ibn Tulun mosque, whose austere geometry presents a surprisingly perfect match for the minimalist aesthetic of Pei's own greatest work (most notably his 1985-89 glass and metal pyramid for the Louvre).

The result is a dome-like structure that looks both futuristic and timeless, made from cream-coloured limestone blocks set at angles to each other so that they catch light or cast shadow as the sun rises and falls throughout the day. The building's relationship with the light gives it a sense of measure and pace. Pei also

offers a touch of whimsy, courtesy of the lunette windows on the top floor: if you catch them at the right angle, a friend pointed out to me at the opening, they suggest a woman's eyes gazing out from her abaya.

Yet what is perhaps most impressive is that, unlike many museum projects with a celebrity architect attached, this building doesn't overwhelm what's inside it – and its contents are more than a match for Pei's design.

An introductory gallery on the second floor showcases some of the collection highlights – a 15th century silk wall-hanging from Spain, which may once have hung at the Alhambra Palace in Granada, and the intensely blue Cavour Vase, one of the very few surviving examples of domestic enamelled glassware from the 13th century Mamluk period. There is also a carved jade amulet covered with minuscule calligraphy; it was made in 1631 for the Indian Mughal emperor Shah Jahan, who carried it to assuage his grief after the death of his wife, for whom he built the Taj Mahal.

Today the museum has about 4,000 such objects in its collection – all of which are now owned by the State of Qatar, not the royal family, and eight hundred of which are on display. (That's a huge proportion in comparison to most museums, which typically show only about one to five per cent of their permanent collections.) The objects date from the beginnings of Islam in the seventh century to the waning days of the Ottoman Empire and include plenty of secular objects, such as carpets, armour, cups, jewellery, panelled doors and the like, as well as religious ones, such as curtains and keys from the Kaaba and an extensive collection of Qurans.

In fact, Oliver Watson, a British curator who has been the director of the museum since June, said that the designation "Islamic art" is really just a shorthand description: "A more accurate way of describing it is art from the Islamic world," he explains. To qualify for inclusion, a piece must have been produced within a predominantly Islamic culture, in a country under Islamic rule, which means the collection's geographical reach extends from China to Spain.

According to Watson, who was



The exhibition design by Jean-Claude Wilmotte has created dark, subtly detailed galleries that are dramatically illuminated with spotlights. Hassan Ammar / AP Photo

formerly keeper of Eastern art at the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford University, this definition of Islamic art is essentially the same as that used by the great museums in the West, including the Metropolitan, the British Museum, and the Louvre, as well as national collections in the East, such as The Turkish and Islamic Arts Museum in Istanbul, The National Museum in Damascus, and The Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo.

The collection looks extremely fresh, a real achievement considering its ancient subject matter. This is partly due to the exhibition design, by Jean-Claude Wilmotte, Pei's collaborator on the Louvre pyramid, who has created dark, subtly detailed galleries that are dramatically illuminated with pin spotlights. Some of the objects are mounted on pedestals fashioned from the same dark grey porphyry as the floor, so that they appear to float in space, and everything is housed in vitrines made of non-reflective glass that seems to disappear as you approach. In addition, each goblet, vase and piece of jewellery is given plenty of space – quite different from the crowded, jumbled-together displays of Islamic art one sees in most museums.

Ironically enough, this lighting scheme – producing a dark, mysterious cavern pierced by spotlights – is reminiscent of an exhibition style fashionable in America in the 1970s,

the era of the touring blockbuster exhibition. It was usually employed to amp up the mysterious allure of exotic objects from foreign lands, such as Islamic art.

Yet as used here, the style works to focus your attention on each individual object – as does the flat-screen monitor in every gallery, which presents some of the pieces in each room in soundless, close-up detail. The museum's decision to include very little wall text also adds to this effect.

"Our philosophy is that putting more and more text into your gallery doesn't actually help the interpretation," said Watson. "In fact, it can be distracting, particularly when you do it in two languages." For greater detail, visitors may consult the audio guide, which should cover 100 pieces by this month, or attend one of the many daily tours led by young Qataris.

The museum's display has also been organised to tell the story of Islamic art in a rather unusual fashion. The second-floor galleries are divided thematically into different sections: calligraphy, writing in art, figuration, science and pattern. Each room mixes objects from different periods and locales to highlight themes that have remained consistent for centuries.

In the calligraphy section, a page from the legendary ninth or 10th century North African Blue Quran, with gold-leaf lettering on indigo-

dyed parchment, sits near a page from the Central Asian Baysunghur Quran (1400-1430), whose black ink-on-paper script is sparer and more elongated. Science in Art presents ornately decorated scientific instruments, like a celestial globe from India (1676-77) and a North African astrolabe (1732-33). Figure in Art offers many different depictions of people – quite common in non-religious Islamic artworks, said Watson – such as a silk carpet (late 16th to early 17th century) that presents a scene from the love story of Leila and Majnun.

The third-floor display cuts through the collection differently, with a chronological layout that shows how these themes were varied in different regions and time periods. Here there is a focus on the 12th to 16th century Middle East, India, and Central Asia.

What's missing is contemporary art from the Arab or Islamic world – because, Watson believes, it does not fit the museum's mandate: "Contemporary painting is a recent development which is taking its impetus much more from western art traditions," he said. In addition, he noted, much of the craftsmanship associated with traditional Islamic art – weaving, enamelling, manuscript illumination – died out in the 19th century once industrial production took hold, much as it did in the West. (Paradoxically, in an international art world that sometimes seems obsessed by the new, the absence of it here is one of the things that makes this museum stand out.)

For the moment, those who seek contemporary work may repair to the temporary exhibition galleries on the first floor, which host an exhibition called Beyond Boundaries: Islamic Art Across Cultures. It includes new work by the 93-year-old artist Maqbool Fida Husain, dubbed by some "the Picasso of India," who lives in exile in the Gulf. There is also a fascinating multimedia display based on The Book of Secrets, an 11th century Spanish manuscript that depicts dozens of curious machines, such as cannons, water clocks and automata. The book has been digitised, so one can page through it and examine the machines in detail. There are also a few models of the machines on view.

Hubert Bari, the curator who organised this show, said that the temporary exhibition galleries will draw on all of Qatar's state collections, as well as loans from other museums, to mount shows that explore different aspects of Islamic art.

"Nobody can imagine what we have in our storage," said Bari. "It is probably the last curiosity cabinet in the world – and assembled by a royal family, by the same principle as it was by the emperor Rudolf II in Prague. It is fantastic." (Rudolf, the Holy Roman Emperor who ruled central Europe from 1576-1612, was renowned for his encyclopaedic, rigorously organised collection.)

2009 will bring exhibitions on Assyrian treasures from the British Museum, Islamic tiled architecture and pearls in the Gulf. In 2010 – when Qatar will be designated the Arab Capital of Culture – the museum will borrow work from the French business magnate Francois Pinault, whose contemporary art collection is one of the world's largest. Also in the planning stages are several exhibitions on pre-Islamic art.

In fact, these temporary exhibitions may well offer a preview of Qatar's future museums. Although Mandle remains mum about all of them – except for the National Museum, designed by Jean Nouvel and slated to open in 2012 – another source at the QMA said that they are planning three more: one for photography; another for modern and contemporary Arab art; and a third devoted to Orientalism, a concept that will likely be expanded beyond its usual connotations involving 19th century Europe's fascination with the East. According to this source, the Orientalism museum is now being designed by the Swiss architects Herzog and de Meuron.

Mandle, when asked about these plans, said, "I can't deny those claims but I can't substantiate them with facts, either. It's a cardinal rule here that rather than giving bold promises about things that are supposed to happen, we feel it's better to be really secure about what we're doing, and then announce something when we're really ready to do so."

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