



THE AGA KHAN TRUST FOR CULTURE



Obra Social  
Fundación "la Caixa"



# THE WORLDS OF ISLAM

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## IN THE AGA KHAN MUSEUM COLLECTION

**Press Dossier**

**CaixaForum Madrid**

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From 4 June to 6 September 2009



THE AGA KHAN TRUST FOR CULTURE



Obra Social  
Fundación "la Caixa"

"la Caixa" Social and Cultural Outreach Projects at CaixaForum Madrid shows some of the greatest treasures of Islamic art, from ancient al-Andalus to India

## The Worlds of Islam in the Aga Khan Museum Collection

The art, the history, the traditions and the geographies of the Islamic world from the Far East to the Iberian Peninsula are the subjects of the exhibition *The Worlds of Islam in the Aga Khan Museum Collection*. Organised by "la Caixa" Social and Cultural Outreach Projects in association with the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, it contains some of the finest productions, not only of the Islamic sphere, but of universal art, with the common denominator of the Arabic language and the Muslim religion. The Aga Khan Museum Collection includes valuable and important pieces from the historical dynasties of the Muslim world. They describe the magnificence of the courts of the Abassids, Fatimids, Safavids or Moguls and show the ductility of Islamic art, capable of conveying a message, not always a religious one, adopting different styles and combining elements from different cultural traditions: from Roman to Persian, from Turkish to Chinese, from Mahgrebi to Hindu, transforming what it imitated and giving it a personality of its own. The exhibition, which can be seen at CaixaForum Madrid until 6 September, presents a set of 190 objects spanning 1400 years of history and summarising, in wood, stone, gold, bronze, ivory, glass, ceramic, fabric, parchment and paper, the finest artistic accomplishments of a world that stretched from ancient al-Andalus to India.

The exhibition *The Worlds of Islam in the Aga Khan Museum Collection*, curated by Benoît Junod, director of Museums and Exhibitions at the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, can be seen at CaixaForum Madrid (Paseo del Prado, 36) from 5 June to 6 September and will later travel to CaixaForum Barcelona.

**Madrid, 4 June 2009.**- His Majesty the King; His Highness Prince Aga Khan; and the honorary chairman of "la Caixa" and first vice-chairman of Fundación "la Caixa", Ricardo Fornesa, have inaugurated today at CaixaForum Madrid the exhibition *The Worlds of Islam in the Aga Khan Museum Collection*. The inauguration was also attended by Jaime Lanaspá, director general of Fundación "la Caixa", and Luis Monreal, director general of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture.

The purpose of the exhibitions which "la Caixa" Social and Cultural Outreach Projects devotes to the cultures of Antiquity is to show the different ways in which men from different places and in different periods have confronted the great universal questions, and to broaden our perspectives on the world. Among others, "la Caixa" has recently mounted outstanding shows such as the ones devoted to Indian figurative sculpture or Etruscan civilisation.

*The Worlds of Islam in the Aga Khan Museum Collection*, organised by "la Caixa" Social and Cultural Outreach Projects in association with the Aga Khan Trust for Culture –the cultural agency of the Aga Khan Development Network– shows a set of 190 objects of Islamic art spanning fourteen centuries of history and from the Iberian Peninsula to the Far East. The exhibition is curated by Benoît Junod, director of Museums and Exhibitions at the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, with the assistance of a scientific committee of international experts. After being shown first at CaixaForum Madrid, the exhibition will travel to Barcelona between October 2009 and January 2010.

The exhibition sets out to question current commonplaces about the polarity between East and West and reconcile points of view about Muslim culture, an integral part of the Spanish historical heritage. Through works of art of different periods and geographical origins, the exhibition reflects the splendour of Muslim culture in its full diversity, bringing out the pluralism of Islam, both in interpretations of the Koranic faith and the variety of styles, materials and techniques that make up its artistic expressions.

The works come from the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC), which has one of the finest collections of Islamic art in the world, put together by the Aga Khan over the last two decades. It contains important, valuable pieces from almost all the historical dynasties of the Muslim world, a summary in wood, stone, gold, bronze, ivory, glass, ceramic, fabric, parchment and paper of the finest artistic accomplishments of the Islamic world.

At present, the AKTC has a project to build a museum in Toronto (Canada) to house the collections permanently. Meanwhile, the works are being shown in different cities around the world. For the exhibition at CaixaForum Madrid and

CaixaForum Barcelona the collection has been reorganised, bearing in mind that it is to be shown in a country that has had its own Muslim culture.

Among the outstanding works on show is a rich group of manuscripts and miniatures with figurative representations, which are among the finest productions not only of the Islamic sphere, but of universal art. They help refute the widespread commonplace of the prohibition of images in Islamic art, since although Islam does not use animal or human motifs in buildings or objects related to religion, in the official or private civil sphere there have been representations of living beings, often profuse. It was merely a matter of aesthetic preferences and historical moments.

The first followers of Islam were nomadic tribes who had no artistic tradition. That is why one of the characteristics of Islamic art is its capacity to fuse and synthesise the outstanding features of the art of the nations it conquered. By combining those influences, they succeeded in creating an artistic style of their own, easily recognisable even today.

The exhibition presents the different Islamic dynasties, with their radiuses of territorial influence, which appeared in the wake of the dismembering of the Abbasid caliphate in the late 9th century: the Omeyas (al-Andalus), the Fatimids and the Mamelukes (Egypt), the Ottomans (Turkey), the Safavids and Qajars (Iran) and the Moguls (India). The Fatimid court was outstanding for its opulence, as some of the pieces of jewelry on show bear witness. The essential features of Islamic court culture are traced through a generic portrait of the profile of their sovereigns. Emphasis is placed on the high cultural level of the Islamic courts that were responsible for spreading knowledge of Ancient Greece to the West through their Arabic translations.

The exhibition also reflects some of the fundamental features of Islamic architecture, such as a capital in the Roman tradition with Islamic ornamental motifs, as well as carved wooden beams and doors. The outstanding examples of painting are to be found in the books illustrated with miniatures and the portraits of kings and sultans.

The works on show are distributed in three large sections. A central part is devoted to *The Koranic Faith* and the other two provide a cultural tour of the Islamic courts through the metaphor of the journey in two geographical stages: *From Cordoba to Damascus* and *From Baghdad to Delhi*.

## The Koranic faith

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The Koran was a source of inspiration for artists, craftsmen and architects, creators of luxurious books with beautiful calligraphies and works of a refined sensibility that spread its teachings throughout the Islamic world. Copying verses from the Koran was regarded as a devout practice; hence their presence on a wide range of surfaces. In this section we can admire the different styles of Arabic writing, all of high ornamental value.

- The Koran and its supports. In this area there is a splendid collection of Korans from the entire geographical arc represented in the exhibition, from 9th and 10th century folios written in gold, from North Africa, to a 19th century Indonesian Koran, with pieces of porcelain, painted ceramic, gold or carved wood inscribed with the sacred text. The first manuscripts were written on parchment and, in the 10th century, its replacement with paper increased the production of Korans in the Islamic world. The Aga Khan Museum collection has small format copies for private use together with larger ones that were used in the great mosques. Koranic inscriptions were incorporated into architecture, carved in stone or in the form of friezes on bricks and tiles. The word God was also written on humble surfaces –leaves, shells– as a lasting act of devotion and artistic virtuosity.
- Mysticism. The mystics, known as Sufis or dervishes, seek union with God through prayer and the *dikr*, the repetition of sacred words and phrases. One of the most famous was the poet Yalal al-Din Rumi. Their followers, the Mevlevi dervishes, have spread their poetry all around the world. Princes and rulers had dervishes as their spiritual advisors and in some works of art they appear represented next to them talking about religious subjects.
- Pilgrimage and prayer. The diversity of artistic styles of the works in this section show the impact of pilgrimage on the whole Islamic world, with expressions of devout art of different kinds according to the country and the moment, from the decoration of travel documents to mural ornamentation of the pilgrims' houses in Egypt or the souvenirs derived from the experience itself. The pilgrims' desire to show that they had observed the precept led to the distribution of plans of Mecca, the Great Mosque or the different places they had visited.

## From Cordoba to Damascus

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The Omeya caliphate drew the Peninsula into a vast transcontinental empire which, from Cordoba to Damascus, became the backbone of human civilisation. Everything new came from the East: the literary and scientific works of Antiquity, lost after the fall of the Roman Empire and conserved in Arabic translations, and the works of the great Muslim humanists and scientists, fundamental for the development of astronomy, mathematics or natural history. The artistic styles from Byzantium or ancient Persia also travelled along the trade routes.

- Al-Andalus and Mahgreb. Between 711 and 714 the Arabs conquered the Iberian Peninsula. The Omeya dynasty introduced an artistic model with Syrian roots with a mixture of Roman-Byzantine and Persian elements. In 756 the Omeyas, defeated in Syria, took refuge in al-Andalus and art heightened its oriental features. The influence of Andalusian art was felt in Morocco and Tunis and even in sub-Saharan regions, in Mauritania and Mali. It lasted until the Middle Ages, with periods of exquisite refinement, such as the sultanate of Granada.
- Egypt and Syria. In 750 the Abbasids defeated the first Islamic dynasty, the Omeyas, and the cultural and political centre shifted from Damascus to Baghdad. For five centuries, Syria and Egypt lived a series of upheavals. The political fluctuations were reflected in the mixture of artistic motifs, styles and techniques, with influences in both directions. For example, glazed ceramics were developed in the 8th century in Egypt and Syria and exported to Iraq, from where they were reintroduced into Egypt as a decorative element in the Fatimid period.

In the 10th century the Fatimids came to dominate Mecca and Medina, Yemen and parts of Palestine and Syria. The military clashes between different factions created economic difficulties for the caliphate which, in 1060, could not pay the soldiers' wages, which led to the sacking of the treasury. The description of the sacking provides an outstanding testimony to the luxury and refinement of the court, as we can see in the exhibition: objects carved out of rock crystal for keeping precious substances, fabrics as fine as cobwebs with the name and titles of the caliphate, jewels made in delicate filigree and enamel.

The Fatimid dynasty succumbed in 1171 to Saladin. When he died the government passed into the hands of the military caste of elite slaves, the Mamelukes. One of the requisites for coming to power was to have been born a slave and most of the constructions of the period were monumental

mausoleums, with enormous domes, to highlight the individual personality of each ruler. These architectural complexes were equipped with copies of the Koran, lamps, candelabras and luxury objects.

- Anatolia: the Ottomans. The objects on display in this room date from the 15th-18th centuries. In that period the Ottoman, Safavid and Mogul states dominated a vast territory between the Middle East, Africa and India, and made huge profits from trade. The sultans fostered the creation of an imperial artistic style that incorporated non-figurative decoration, plants or flowers. In the second half of the 16th century the portrait became popular to show the mark of the rulers, with the figure of the sultan, magnificent, cultured and powerful, surrounded by his subjects.

### **From Baghdad to Delhi**

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The Muslim Arab conquerors of the 7th century invaded all the territories of their old rival, the Persian Empire, and created a single territorial unit between the Tagus and the Indus. The dominant Persian presence was joined by influences from the Far East through trading and cultural contacts and the presence of Chinese artists.

- Mesopotamia. In 750 the capital of the Muslim world moved to Baghdad. The ancient Persian culture left a very visible trace on the artistic expressions of the region. The taste for the exotic, which is reflected in the ceramics, was encouraged by trade with the East. It was an age of splendour for the publication of books, with scientific and literary works and the “princes’ mirrors”, instructive tales which the rulers used as manuals for their education.
- Iran and Central Asia. In 651 the Islamic conquest of Iran was completed. Greater Persia –which at different times in history included Iran, Iraq, Armenia, zones of Turkey, Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan and some coastal regions of the Arabian Peninsula– became part of the Abbasid caliphate. Among the pre-Islamic Iranian traditions were glass and metal craftsmanship, stuccoed mural painting and the silk industry. Decorative motifs from the Near East, like pairs of birds or gryphons, lions or strings of pearls, were incorporated into the Islamic visual repertory. One of the outstanding contributions was in the literary sphere: the *Shahnama* (Book of Kings), which recounted the legends of the ancient Iranian kings and heroes, was profusely illustrated.

In Iran the Muslims received the influence of China. The Seljuks and the Mongol khans who overthrew the Abbasid caliphate in 1258 introduced an

aesthetic of far eastern inspiration, with Chinese ornamental motifs (the lotus, the dragon and the phoenix), and wood carving techniques.

The art of the 16th century was open to foreign influences. New ways of metal working appeared, making it possible to produce openwork steel plates and small objects. In the 17th century interest in the portrait grew, partly as a consequence of the import of European engravings. Each court developed its own iconography. The Safavids used to have themselves portrayed at reception ceremonies for foreign ambassadors, to glorify their supremacy and magnanimity.

The Qajar dynasty ruled in Iran from 1779 to 1925. Fat'h Ali Shah began his reign amidst an unstable political situation and perhaps for that reason promoted the propaganda of his imperial image, with a large number of portraits to be hung in all official buildings. Later Nasir al-Dan Shah promoted the artistic ideas and technologies of Europe. He himself was an amateur photographer.

- India and the Moguls. The characteristic of the art of the Moguls is naturalism: portraits of sultans and important persons of his dynasty, plants and animals from India and scenes from the history of their kingdom. One of the most important forms of their art is painting, used as a resource in the service of power. Genealogical and historical pictures emphasised the legitimacy and power of the different dynasties. Other works show the importance given to the *darbar* ceremony, the public audience, and the *darshan* ceremony, which featured the divine enlightenment of the sovereign through a ritual representation. Painting is associated with other arts in compositions that set out to arouse in the spectator sensory experiences similar to those of music, or in paintings that recreated epic or legendary literary themes.

# ***The Worlds of Islam in the Aga Khan Museum Collection***

**Inauguration: Thursday 4 June, at 12.30**

**CaixaForum Madrid**

Paseo del Prado, 36  
28014 Madrid

**Opening times**

Monday to Sunday, 10.00 to 20.00  
Saturdays, 10.00 to 22.00

**"la Caixa" Social and Cultural Outreach Projects Information Service**

Monday to Sunday, 9.00 to 20.00  
Tel.: 902 22 30 40  
[www.lacaixa.es/obrasocial](http://www.lacaixa.es/obrasocial)

**Admission to the exhibition free**

**For more information:**

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**Multimedia press note**

<http://prensa.lacaixa.es/obrasocial/>  
<http://www.obrasocial.lacaixa.es>

## COMPLEMENTARY ACTIVITIES TO THE EXHIBITION

- **INAUGURAL LECTURE**

*Wednesday, 3 June at 18.30*

Given by **Benoît JUNOD**, curator of the exhibition

- **ART MORNINGS COURSE: THE WORLDS OF ISLAM**

Given by **Víctor PALLEJÁ**, Islamologist, lecturer at the Universidad de Alicante

*Friday 5 June at 11.30*

**An approach to Islamic art: unity and multiplicity**

To understand Islamic art better it is important to appreciate its unity within an extremely broad and complex context. Borders and usual concepts which are sometimes poorly defined need to be reopened to make way for a global and intelligent vision of “The Worlds of Islam”.

*Thursday 11 June at 11.30*

**A fascination with writing: Koran and epigraphy**

The revealed Book of Islam occupies a central place in Koranic artistic sensibility. It is indispensable to understand why calligraphy is the supreme visual art and how it expresses a deep experience of the language. A study of it enables us to discover many of the most secret features of its aesthetic.

*Friday 19 June at 11.30*

**Way of life in a cosmopolitan culture: travel and architecture**

The arts and artists of Islam lived in a civilisation that was urban and nomadic at the same time. Palaces, gardens and residences often housed wandering men. This twofold aspect explains the development and widespread distribution of a peculiar aesthetic that distinguishes Islamic art. That “architecture” of its own coincides with a sophisticated way of life appreciated for centuries and still prestigious.

*Friday 26 June at 11.30*

**Artistic experience and sensibility: the pilgrimage and the mystics**

The rich content of allusions and ideas expressed in the Islamic arts comes from an enormous accumulation of traditions and doctrines that developed in Islam. The pilgrimage in particular created a way of life that enabled the arts to flourish at all levels of society. Among its many spiritual dimensions, the world of the Sufis is a major sphere of artistic expression, providing many meanings and experiences of its own.

- **FILMED MUSIC SEASON – MUSIC OF CENTRAL ASIA**

In the Soviet era the traditions of many republics of Central Asia dissolved into the cultural and artistic homogeneity imposed from Moscow. Much of the traditional music of those cultures was lost, or underwent substantial modifications to adapt to Western tastes and models. From 1991, however, with the break-up of the Soviet Union, the music of those countries began to return to its most ancient roots in order to recover, preserve and spread the treasures of their musical heritage.

Coproduced by the Aga Kan Trust for Culture and the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage of the Smithsonian Institution, the season presents some of the leading exponents of different Central Asian musical traditions, through high quality documentaries that explore the lives, the work and the sources of inspiration of a new generation of musicians who, with great talent and innovatory ideas, have brought new life to this legacy. Intimate and moving portraits that invite us to discover in a little more depth some fascinating cultures that are still practically unknown to us.

*Wednesday 10 June 2009, at 19.30*

**Tengir-Too: Mountain Music from Kyrgyzstan.** Smithsonian Folkways Recordings 2005, 24 min, Spanish subtitles

**Invisible Face of the Beloved: Classical Music of the Tajiks and Uzbeks.** Smithsonian Folkways Recordings 2005, 24 min, Spanish subtitles

*Wednesday 17 June, at 19.30*

**Homayun Sakhi: The Art of the Afghan Rubab.** Smithsonian Folkways Recordings 2005, 24 min, Spanish subtitles

**Bardic Divas: Women's Voices in Central Asia.** Smithsonian Folkways Recordings 2007, 24 min, Spanish subtitles

*Wednesday 24 June 2009, at 19.30*

**Badakhshan Ensemble: Song and Dance from the Pamir Mountains.** Smithsonian Folkways Recordings 2007, 24 min, Spanish subtitles

**Alim and Fargana Qasimov: Spiritual Music of Azerbaijan.** Smithsonian Folkways Recordings 2005, 24 min, Spanish subtitles

Prices: Per session: €2 (LKXA, Club Estrella, Carnet Joven and Carnet +25: €1). Limited number of places