

EXHIBITION

Faith, tradition and culture



An extraordinary confluence of faiths and cultures lies at the heart of an international exhibition opening in Canberra this April.

BY KATHERINE AIGNER,
ASSOCIATE CURATOR, VATICAN
ANIMA MUNDI MUSEUM, AND
CAROL COOPER, SENIOR
CURATOR, NATIONAL MUSEUM
OF AUSTRALIA

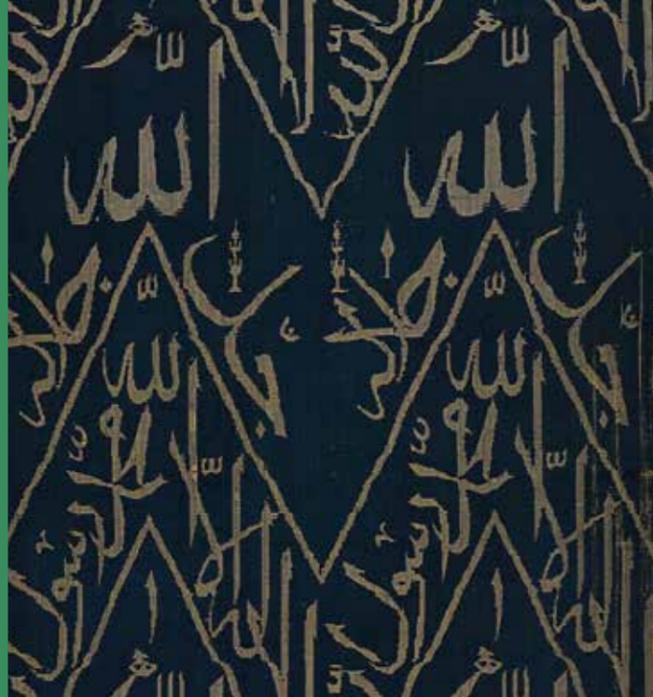


The exhibition *'So That You Might Know Each Other': Faith and Culture in Islam* brings together more than 100 objects from collections held in the Vatican, the Emirate of Sharjah and Australia, to give audiences a glimpse into the traditions, culture and creativity of Islamic communities across Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Australia. The title is taken from a verse in the Holy Qur'an (49:13). It reflects the intent shared by all of the exhibition partners, to invite museum visitors to learn more about the diverse cultural and artistic expressions of Muslim cultures around the world.

Most of the objects in the exhibition come from the collection of the Vatican *Anima Mundi* Museum. Formerly the Vatican Ethnological Museum, it sees its role as a tribute to the world's cultural and spiritual diversity, and its new name, *'Anima Mundi'* ('soul of the world'), is a philosophical term that refers to the connection between all living things. While the museum's collections can be traced back to scholar and collector Cardinal Stefano Borgia (1731–1804), the majority of ethnographic objects relating to the Islamic world came to the Vatican between 1924 and 1925 during the tenure of Pope Pius XI. The Pope wanted to hold an exhibition in the centre of Catholicism to demonstrate the dignity and the value of non-European artistic and religious expressions. The massive Universal Missionary Exposition was held in 26 halls across the Vatican and displayed more than 100,000 items contributed by indigenous peoples from Catholic missions around the world. Most of the objects were returned to their places of origin at the close of the exhibition, but approximately 40,000 were chosen to remain in the Vatican's collection. The wide-ranging collection includes prehistoric artefacts



THE ARTEFACTS RANGE FROM THE LATE 17TH CENTURY AND DERIVE FROM TRADITIONAL WAYS OF LIFE THAT PREDATE THE ONSET OF MODERNITY AND GLOBALISATION



later, and bears witness to the colonial expansion of Italy in East Africa and Libya. In 1939 an Arab necklace that had been worn by a lady from Cyrenaica was bequeathed to the Vatican Ethnological Museum. Called Barqa by the Arabs, this eastern region of Libya was occupied by Italy during the Italo-Turkish war and administered by it from 1927 to 1943.

ISLAM IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND ASIA

The exhibition also displays objects from the Eurasian continent, where the arrival of Islam is regarded as a major historical and cultural event. Islam spread from the Arabian Peninsula in the 7th century, after the death of Muhammad in 632 and the decline of the Roman and Persian empires. By 644, Persia, Armenia, Egypt, Cyprus, Crete and Rhodes were under Muslim control, and the expansion continued to reach Andalusia (southern Spain) in the West, China in the east, and the borders of India, reaching its climax when Baghdad fell to the Mongols in 1258. From the 15th century on, the great Islamic empires of Safavid Persia, Mughal India and the Ottoman moved through Eastern Europe, the Arabian world and across Asia. Political, military and commercial expansion brought with it people, ideas and artistic traditions that interacted and merged with the indigenous cultures, leading to new forms of artistic and cultural expression. Knowledge, languages, religions and customs were exchanged along caravan routes, at oases and resting places where goods were traded, perhaps while relaxing over an intricately fashioned *hookah* or water pipe, like the ones still found in coffee shops throughout the Middle East. A common language, Arabic, helped foster international networks of communication.

An embroidered girl's dress from Tel Kaif, Northern Iraq, shows complicated chain-stitch depictions of human figures,

flowers, birds and water containers within floral scrolls — age-old symbols of fertility and eternal life.

From the Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilization comes a tiny but intriguing 'perpetual calendar' made in the early 1900s. Traditionally Muslims follow the lunar Islamic calendar, counted from the year 622 CE, when the Prophet Muhammad emigrated from Makkah to Madinah with his followers and established the first Islamic community. In the 19th century, the influx of Western cultural ideas into the Middle East led to the gradual adaption of the Gregorian calendar alongside the Islamic one. This fusion of cultural ideas can be seen in the Ottoman, Armenian and Russian influences on the design of the calendar.



from all over the world dating from over two million years ago; objects from pre-Columbian and Islamic civilisations; and contemporary objects from Africa, Asia, Oceania, Australia and the Americas.

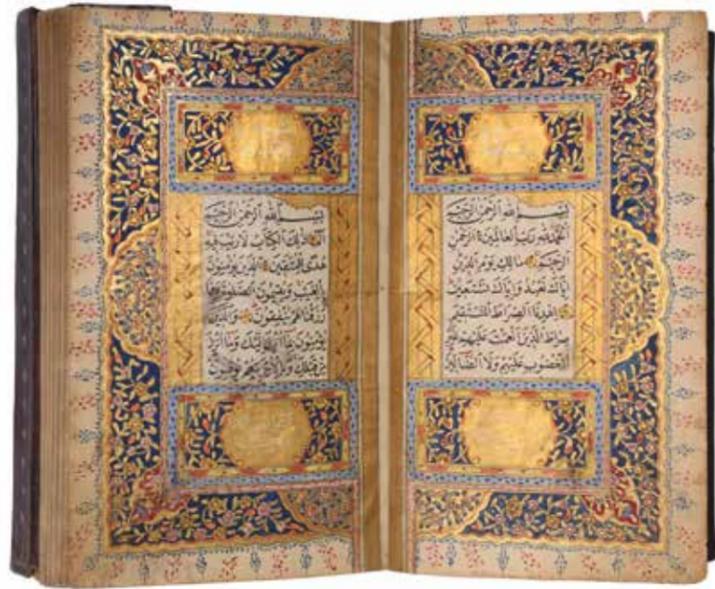
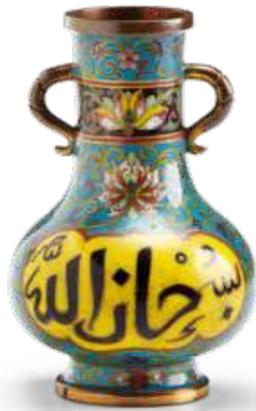
The Sharjah Museums Authority is the other major partner in this exhibition. It oversees 19 museums that collectively cover areas of Islamic art and culture, archaeology, heritage, science, marine life and the history of Sharjah and the region. When it hosted an exhibition of the Vatican *Anima Mundi* Museum's Islamic collection at the Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilization in 2014, it was the first time in more than 500 years that the Vatican had collaborated with a partner in the Muslim world for an exhibition. It was also the first time that a public museum in an Islamic country had hosted an exhibition from the collection of the Vatican Museums. The Vatican objects displayed in Sharjah in 2014 form the core of the Canberra show, and are supplemented with significant objects from several Sharjah museums as well as objects associated with two quintessentially Australian Islamic stories.

The Islamic world is not a monolithic civilisation, but encompasses a plurality of expressions that reflect the different cultural contexts in which they exist. The widespread origins of the Vatican collection — from Morocco to Indonesia, Zanzibar to China,

Palestine to Iraq — offer a glimpse into the world's Muslim communities and the objects they made, used and traded. The artefacts on display in Canberra range from the late 17th to the early 20th century and derive from traditional ways of life that predate the onset of modernity and globalisation. The selection of such a broad spectrum of art and cultural objects, including textiles, jewellery, armour, manuscripts, musical instruments, furniture, richly coloured Imperial ceramics and calligraphy, aims to highlight the diversity of Muslim people around the world, their achievements, traditions and spirituality.

ISLAM IN AFRICA

Many of the objects date back to the original 1925 Exposition, and exemplify the Pope's desire to introduce little-known aspects of the cultures of North Africa to a European audience by exhibiting, for example, a Moroccan lute that speaks to the refined musical life of the Berber people from the Atlas regions of North Africa. Religious objects are also represented, such as the intriguing amulets inscribed with verses from the Qur'an of the Marabouts (wandering Muslim holy men of Ghana). One exquisite object came into the collection

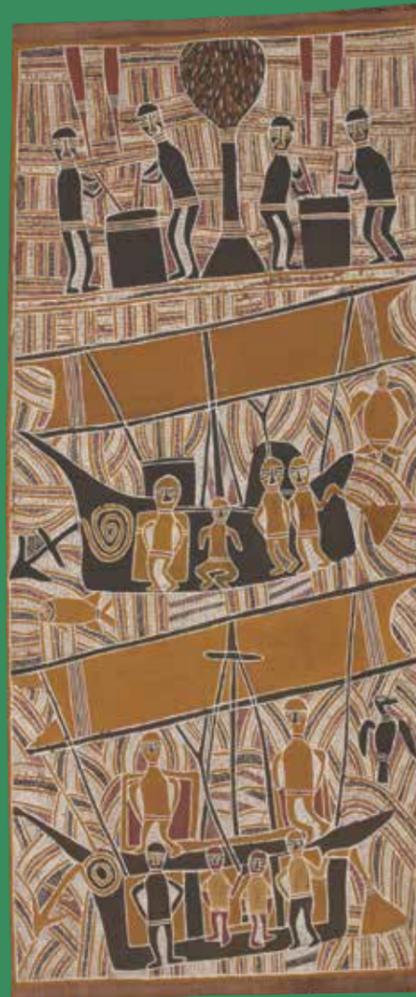


Calligraphy — a feature of many objects in the exhibition — developed as an elegant decoration and sublime art form that is immensely respected in Islamic culture. It can be found not just on paper, but also on buildings and objects. The richly decorated, late 19th-century Bidri shield from India, inlaid with black niello decoration, was probably intended for decorative or ceremonial use. The Farsi poem inscribed on it translates as: ‘Oh Creator of creations, all high [and] low, grant from existence six things: knowledge, [good] deeds, generosity, faith, safety and good health’.

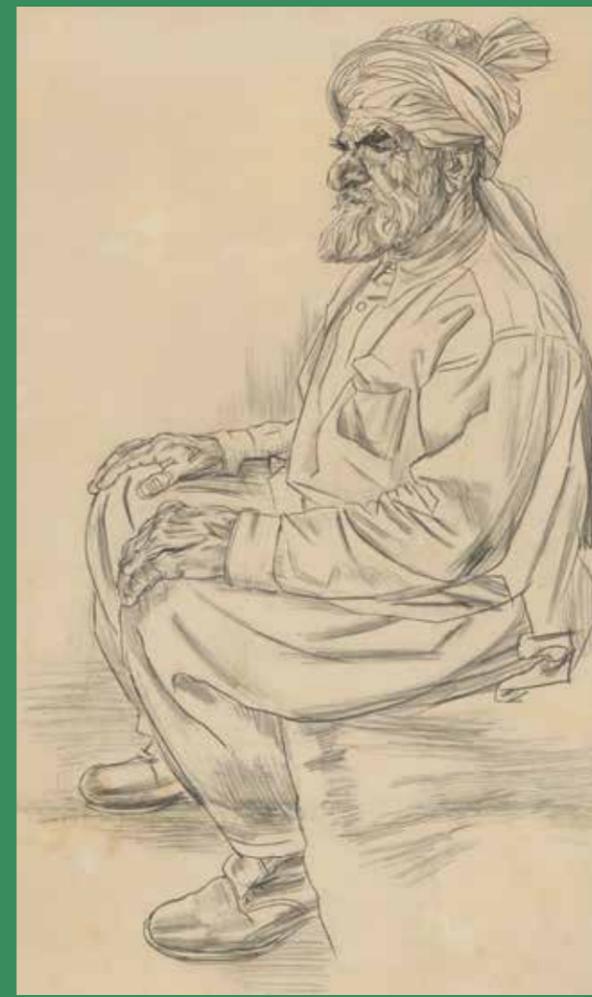
The enamelling technique of cloisonné developed in Byzantium and was brought to China in the 15th century by skilled Muslim artisans after the fall of Constantinople. The commingling of cultural styles is clear in a Chinese-style cloisonné vase from the early 18th century that is decorated with religious quotations.

Trade spread Islam through Malaysia, Borneo and Indonesia. From the 10th century, Chinese and Muslim merchants used the Philippines as a stopover. Examples of Islamic influence can be seen in the highly decorative bracelets and buttons that reflect the multicultural artistic influences of Europe, Arabia, China, India and Indonesia. Currently, over 60 per cent of the world’s Muslim population live in South and South-East Asia, with Indonesia as the major hub.

Significant objects deriving from the central tenets of Islam will also be on display, including some exquisitely decorated Qur’ans. In addition, the Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilization has contributed an elaborate series of ceremonial coverings and hangings. Most precious of all, woven in silk and dating from the 17th–18th century is a fragment from a Kiswah (ceremonial covering) for the Ka’ba in Makkah (Mecca). The Ka’ba is the building at the centre of the Great Mosque, Al-Masjid Al-Haram, which is the birthplace of Muhammad and Islam. The Kiswah is changed annually during the Hajj pilgrimage of Muslims to Makkah, and the old covering is cut into pieces and distributed to important people and organisations.



... THE FIRST NON-ABORIGINAL PEOPLE ABLE TO NAVIGATE AND SURVIVE THE VAST AND SEEMINGLY INHOSPITABLE LANDS OF CENTRAL AUSTRALIA



ISLAM IN AUSTRALIA

From the 18th to the early 20th centuries, the same period in which the majority of objects in this exhibition were created and used, people of Islamic faith made unique contributions to Australian history. The first of two Australian displays in the exhibition is devoted to the mainly Muslim Makasar fishermen from Sulawesi, whose trading fleets rode the annual monsoonal winds to areas of northern Australia in search of the prized ‘trepang’ or ‘sea cucumber’. The Makasar developed and sustained mutually advantageous relationships with the local Aboriginal people for at least 200 years, a legacy that continues into the 21st century.

The bark painting *Makasar Boiling Down Trepang*, by Aboriginal artist

Mathaman Marika from Yirrkala in north-eastern Arnhem Land, shows several scenes relating to the Makasar trepang-fishing enterprise. Photographic evidence from the early 20th century verifies the bark painter’s recollections of this honoured legacy.

The second group of Muslims to impact on Australia were the cameleers, known as ‘Ghans’, who originated mainly from areas of present-day Pakistan and India. They were brought to Australia to assist with the exploration and development of large tracts of relatively uninhabited desert country, and they were the first non-Aboriginal people able to navigate and survive the vast and seemingly inhospitable lands of Central Australia. The exhibition features one of Australia’s greatest cameleers, Bejah

Dervish, who arrived in Australia from Baluchistan (now Pakistan) in 1890. A master camel handler, he played a crucial role during the ill-fated Calvert Exploring Expedition to uncharted areas of Western Australia in 1896–97. A striking portrait of Bejah by English artist–adventurer Noelle Sandwith is a highlight of this display.

With this exhibition, the Vatican *Anima Mundi* Museum, the Sharjah Museums Authority and the National Museum of Australia hope to increase inter-cultural knowledge, encourage dialogue and promote cultural exchange through the beauty of cultural expression.

‘So That You Might Know Each Other’: Faith and Culture in Islam is on display from 20 April to 22 July 2018.

(THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT) BIDRI SHIELD WITH FARSI POEM, INDIA, LATE 19TH CENTURY; MORO ORNAMENTAL BRACELETS AND BUTTONS FROM THE SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES, LATE 19TH - EARLY 20TH CENTURY; QING DYNASTY CHINESE CLOISONNÉ VASE WITH ISLAMIC INSCRIPTIONS, EARLY 18TH CENTURY. VATICAN ANIMA MUNDI MUSEUM, INV. 122028; INV. 100143, 100145, 100154.2; INV. 120592; ILLUMINATED QUR’AN MANUSCRIPT WITH CALLIGRAPHY IN THE NASKH SCRIPT BY HUSSAYN AL-HILMI, OTTOMAN TURKEY, 1823. SHARJAH MUSEUM OF ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION, SHARJAH MUSEUMS AUTHORITY, SM2006-1446; (FACING PAGE, FROM TOP) BEJAH DERVISH, CAMELEER, 1953, BY NOELLE SANDWITH; DETAIL OF MAKASAR BOILING DOWN TREPANG, 1964, BY MATHAMAN MARIKA, RIRRAJINGU CLAN, YOLNGU PEOPLE. NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA