Faith, tradition and culture

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

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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.
GLOBALISATION OF MODERNITY AND WAYS OF LIFE THAT DERIVE FROM TRADITIONAL CENTURIES AND DERIVE TO THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY AND DERIVE FROM TRADITIONAL ARTIFACTS RANGE AN EXHIBITION OF THE VATICAN MUSEUM AND THE REGION. WHEN IT HOSTED HERITAGE, SCIENCE, MARINE LIFE AND THE HISTORY OF ISLAMIC ART AND CULTURE, ARCHAEOLOGY, IT OVERSEES 19 MUSEUMS THAT COLLECTIVELY COVER THE OTHER MAJOR PARTNER IN THIS EXHIBITION. OCEANIA, AUSTRALIA AND THE AMERICAS. CONTEMPORARY OBJECTS FROM AFRICA, ASIA, THE COLUMBIAN AND ISLAMIC CIVILISATIONS; AND TWO MILLION YEARS AGO; OBJECTS FROM PRE-HISTORY TO THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY; OBJECTS FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD DATING FROM OVER 6 MILLION YEARS AGO; OBJECTS ASSOCIATED WITH TWO QUINTESSENTIAL AFRICAN CIVILISATIONS; AND ARE SUPPLEMENTED WITH SIGNIFICANT OBJECTS FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE VATICAN MUSEUMS.

THE VATICAN MUSEUMS ADMINISTERED BY IT FROM 1927 TO 1943. IT WAS 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 FROM THE CORNER OF THE CALENDAR SHOW, AND ARE SUPPLEMENTED WITH SIGNIFICANT OBJECTS FROM SEVERAL SHARJAH MUSEUMS AS WELL AS OBJECTS ASSOCIATED WITH TWO QUINTESSENTIALLY AUSTRALIAN ARTISANAL OBJECTS.


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 Kaf, 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.
Calligraphy — a feature of many objects in the exhibition — developed as an elegant decoration and subtle 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 18th 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 multi-cultural 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. 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 Mathuram 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 inhospitable lands of Central Australia. The exhibition features one of Australia’s greatest cameleers, Bejah Dervish, who arrived in Australia from Bakhistan (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 1890-97. A striking portrait of Bejah by English artist-adventurer Noel Sandwith is a highlight of this display.

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

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