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Do antiquated Qur'ans and curtains from the Kaaba make an exciting exhibition? *Chris Lord* finds out more

As Baghdad fell to Mongol forces in the 13th century, one erudite calligrapher holed himself up amid the devastating invasion and set about perfecting 'kaf'. The calligrapher was so consumed in the beauty and form of this single Arabic letter that, lost in reveries, he was oblivious to the carnage going on around him. 'If you talk to a professional calligrapher, you can't imagine the things they have in mind when they move across the page,' says Amir Arvand, curator of the Farjam Collection's Ramadan show of ancient Qur'ans, who has just told us this bizarre story.

We ask Arvand if the calligrapher's strength of devotion to their art is almost religious and he agrees. 'We have one piece from Iran, a page from a Qur'an which is 1m wide. It must have been a huge book, but think about when you move your hand along this huge line, writing a letter. Think about how difficult it would be to keep the consistency and form of the letters across that distance. It was a labour.'

Arvand becomes increasingly animated as we discuss the collection. With one hand outstretched he traces

the austere Saharan simplicity of 10th century Kufic Qur'ans, with single pages discovered in North Africa, through to the intricate blossoming Farsi of 19th century Persia – this span of history, he tells us, is represented in the exhibition. 'By looking at this chronology of Qur'ans, you can see the social and political changes that passed through Islamic society. When the Mongols attacked the central empire in Baghdad, for instance, the regional arts became more powerful and mixed with each other. You see the influence of Chinese aesthetics coming into the Qur'ans in this show, like the cartouche, the line surrounding the text – that was very much a Chinese thing. You can actually see the mixing of Chinese, Persian, Indian cultures in this period. And they each do one thing – come together in praise of God. That's the beauty of this.'

A couple of the pieces, noticeably the page from the 10th century Kufic Qur'an, have appeared in the Farjam Collection before and are incredible. With Kufic being the script that the first Qur'an would have been written in, the North African piece seems to

howl from those early years of Islam. Yet somehow the Saharan wind has blown itself deep into the worn page, and has given the script its own ancient, but modern minimalism.

But there are some new inclusions that Arvand is particularly excited about. 'The only period of history where we see the demolition of Qur'ans was in Spain, in Al Andalus when Christian forces took Cordoba from the Muslims. We have found one Qur'an from this period and it's very intact, but we're just hoping it arrives in time for the show from London.'

There's no doubt that a collection of ancient books could be dry viewing, particularly to a non-Muslim who can't read Arabic. Arvand suggests

that the stories behind these Qur'ans, however, are as fascinating as the books themselves. 'Calligraphers were so movable,' he explains, 'they would move from Iran, to Arabia, to Central Asia and Morocco. When they travelled through Islamic territories they were hired by the rulers and would be paid to create a Qur'an.' This image of the Qur'an maker as traveller permeates the show. We get the impression that much

of the shared sense of aesthetics across the growing vastness of the Muslim world came largely from these wandering calligraphers.

As the exhibition charts the evolution of calligraphy, the selections move off the page. There is a small Persian prayer rug included, featuring a motif 'like a photograph' of a mihrab (alcove facing Mecca) in a mosque in Iran. There are also three sombre curtains, stitched in Saudi to drape the Kaaba in Mecca. Arvand explains that the breadth of medium is also vital to understanding the importance of the calligrapher in Islamic society. 'They were the most important artists of their time,' he says, 'and not just for Qur'ans. They were writing on buildings, curtains, inscribing metal and blasting pottery.'

We ask if the Qur'anic calligrapher was ascribed their own holy connection to the word of God by the people, but Arvand disagrees. 'The calligrapher considered themselves part of their society. People respected them because of their art. Back then people couldn't read and write so it was important they had someone around them who could do that. To understand this kind of art you have to put yourselves in the shoes of the artist and the people at the time.

There weren't many atheists so the only philosophy and ideology was religious. For this, calligraphers were very popular and dear to the people.' *The Farjam Collection (04 323 0303) Continues until October*

