

WORD OF GOD, ART OF MAN

A QURAN EXHIBITION OPENS IN DUBAI. MUHAMMAD YUSUF HAS THE DETAILS



Mehnaz Tan



Amir Arvand



Emilie Faure

Farjam Collection, the art gallery at DIFC, Dubai, inaugurated its exhibition of Holy Qurans on August 18. On view till October-end, the display features rare Quranic manuscripts dating from the 3rd to the 13th century AH.

The people at Farjam Collection have spared no effort to perfect the impact of the presentation. It befits the sacredness of the subject. For this show, they have clothed the buzzing space of the gallery in solemn attire. The Qurans — some of them fragile due to age — are enclosed in climate-controlled display cases. Spotlessly white wall panels with carbon black texts have been mounted, to give one a silent commentary on the holy books.

As is customary on the first Wednesday of every month when the gallery provides a guided tour, Farjam Collection provided viewers a scintillating, illustrated brief on the history of Quranic calligraphy and illumination this first Wednesday of September too. The fine details of the calligraphy, the extensive illumination and the brilliant colours that suffused the gallery dazzled and delighted the viewers. I, for one, came away with the feeling that “age cannot wither, nor custom stale” the infinite variety of artistic virtuosity and scholarly devotion of those who work to bring the Word of God to man.

The guides were Emilie Faure, Collections and Exhibition manager, Farjam Collection, Amir Arvand, Tehran-based art specialist and Wissam Shawkat, Iraqi calligrapher, who also provided the text for the wall panels. But it was Faure who ran away with the show. Though from a non-Muslim background, her infectious enthusiasm and eagerness to educate viewers about the revered history of the Qurans, was much commented upon and widely appreciated.

For Muslims, the Quran is the very Word of God. To transcribe the Word of God in a clear, precise and elegant manner has made the “art of beautiful writing” (calligraphy) the pre-eminent Islamic art. It later became conjoined to illuminating the text and page, though the art of illuminating the Quran developed at a slower pace than the art of calligraphy, as it was not directly called in the transcription of the Holy Text. Illumination sought to imitate heaven, since the Quran is a heavenly book.

Over the centuries, a variety of scripts were employed in the transcription of the Quran. They included the Hijazi, Kufic

Thuluth, Mohaqqaq, Naskh and Rihani scripts. Each of them followed strict rules of design set down by master calligraphers as early as the 4th AH.

The inks used came from minerals and naturally-occurring colours. As Dr Nabil F Sawfat points out in his catalogue, “the remarkable beauty and exquisite technical refinement of these hand-written and illuminated Qurans illustrate the affinity between a beautiful script and its ornamentation.”

According to Arvand, the illumination of the Quran was first minimal and geometrical. “It then got more floral and less geometrical, till it reached a peak in the sixteenth century AH. In the beginning, blue and gold colours were used, and later other colours were used,” he said.

One of the highlights of the show is a fragment of the Baysunqur Quran. Made in Heart or Samarkand for Baysunqur, the grandson of Timur the Lame (Tiumurlane), it is an Arabic manuscript in Mohaqqaq script. Said

Shawkat: “It is a very rare and distinctive piece. Its dimensions are immense: what you see here is only one line of the whole work!”

Each page of the Baysunqur Quran is 1.7 metres in length and one metre in width. Containing seven lines on each page, only a few pieces of this astonishing creation are in existence. “Some pieces are in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, some of them are in the Golestan Palace, Iran, some are in private collections and some of them appear in auctions,” Shawkat said.

Faure immersed herself in the legend of the third century (ninth century AD) Quran from Mesopotamia. Written in the Kufic script on parchment, she said that it was one of the oldest surviving such pieces. “But the script is still so modern and so graphically stunning!” she said.

Atsue, a Japanese national who is learning calligraphy in Sharjah, found that the exhibition helped her learn something of the religion and culture of the region. Mehnaz

Tan, manager of Elementa Gallery, Dubai, said that the organisers have to be complimented “for giving an opportunity to the public to view the unique pieces.”

That was what exactly what had motivated Faure and her team. According to her, the exhibitors asked themselves the question “how do you engage with works when you don’t read Arabic?” After much brainstorming and mountains of research, they hit upon the present format, which combines the educative quality of calligraphy and the aestheticism of illumination. The personal touch of the guides is an add-on to the experience.

Faure has become richer for the show. “I can now distinguish different scripts!” she said triumphantly, almost upsetting the hallowed ambience. “It is important for expat communities to understand the nature of the spirituality of the region. This exhibition is one of the tools being given to the public to grasp what they are surrounded by everyday.”