



DIVERSE SHOW: The Farjam Collection exhibits range from a book of prayers and religious poetry (above left) through to Iranian paintings, a gilt pilgrim flask and Islamic pottery (top right). Photos: Bernard Testa

The Ninety-Nine

Works of art connected to Islam over the ages are represented in 99 objects, currently on show at The Farjam Collection

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In a quiet corner of DIFC lurks a cultural centre that defies those tedious stereotypes that claim Dubai has no culture. In this corner of DIFC, around buildings four to eight of the terribly civilised Gate Village, you'll find a number of art galleries, mostly commercial, that tap into the wealthy number-crunchers who work in the area.

Except for one that is. There is one not-for-profit centre whose sole purpose is the exhibition of an Iranian businessman's private collection — Mr Farhad Farjam — and it is one of the largest private collections in the region. Much like at British museums and galleries, entrance is free and the exhibition showing during Ramadan matches the time of year, focusing on Islamic art in 99 objects.

Many of our readers will know immediately why 99 is a significant number in Islam, but others may be unaware that it refers to the 99 names of Allah. The Farjam Collection draws on this significant number to showcase a selection of 99 pieces of Islamic art, featuring items as varied as a 19th

century curtain from the tomb of the Prophet, a 15th century ivory plaque, an 11th Century Qur'an section, and a variety of paintings from Iran and around the Middle East.

The eye-catching curtain from the tomb of the Prophet (right centre) was made using silver and silver-gilt threads. According to Emille Faure, collection and exhibition's manager at The Farjam Collection, the curtain was made using precious materials to ensure it would survive a long time. Taking a tour around the collection introduces the visitor to many such traditions — such as how travellers would take a morning prayer scroll on the road with them, which was designed to help protect them from trouble on the wild trails.

Inside the two-level exhibition area, visitors will also get an idea as to what would have adorned religious buildings through the centuries. Faure explains that most of the pieces would have been commissioned by the royal courts of old, but some of the pieces are copies, where expensive commissioned artworks would have been remade using lesser materials by craftsmen with lesser skills, but the items would have been cheaper for less wealthy buyers. Think cheap prints of the *Mona Lisa* flying off the shelves at the gift shop in the Louvre and you're in the right ballpark.

Down in the collection's lower level, paintings adorn the

walls and unusual objects are displayed in cabinets. The paintings are chronologically arranged, starting with older Iranian art, ending up with more modern Middle Eastern paintings that were commissioned to mimic the style of 19th century European art. These artworks seem further from Islam than other pieces that are literally used within the religion, but they all hold some level of Islamic significance.

It is this last point that makes the collection worthy of a visit during the holy month. For the large non-Muslim population of Dubai, trying to gain some added understanding for Islamic culture is not compulsory, but it is recommended. Starting at The Farjam Collection would be an accessible — and free — way to find out more about a religion that currently has over a billion people fasting. But, regardless of religion, this is a beautiful collection, well-maintained and carefully thought through with the help of Zayed University students. Cultural venues in Dubai do exist, so residents should make use of them where possible — particularly when they're housed in the civilised environs of DIFC.

The Story of Islamic Art in 99 Objects is on at The Farjam Collection @ DIFC, Dubai, until mid-September.

See www.farjamcollection.com for more details. charlie@thalegittimes.com



ISLAMIC INFLUENCE: From paintings to pottery to a curtain from the tomb of the prophet (middle), the objects have varying levels of religious significance



OPEN ACCESS: The collection (left) is not-for-profit, and has free entrance