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Tracing Islamic History Through Its Scripts

By **SUSANNE FOWLER**

ISTANBUL — At first, the play of light on the floor at the entrance to the main exhibit hall of the Sakip Sabanci Museum appears to be a modern, geometric carpet. But in the end, the projected pattern is a clue to what lies ahead in “Treasures of the Aga Khan Museum: Arts of the Book & Calligraphy.”

The image, it turns out, is a representation of geometric Kufic script, an angular 13th-century style of Arabic writing used by the scribes who were the rock stars of early Islamic arts because of their power to spread the word of God.

The exhibition, designed by the Czech architect Boris Micka, traces the transition of Islamic writings from animal-skin parchment to paper, and from blocky, time-consuming print to a quicker cursive script and colorful illustrated texts. Examples appear on materials including wood, metal, ceramics and textiles from North Africa to Iran and the Far East.

Graphic design enthusiasts will be fascinated by a timeline that shows the transitions to different scripts and styles that emerged over time — clues that often help researchers pinpoint the provenance of antiquities.

Examples of the various styles are preserved on a variety of materials, including luxuriously decorated and bound books, carved wooden beams, or a blue-and-yellow silk robe whose exquisite condition is probably thanks to its having been stored for centuries in a cold and low humidity environment.

The items, on display through Feb. 27, form part of the Aga Khan’s collection of Islamic art from the 8th to the 18th centuries, and will find a more permanent home when the Aga Khan Museum opens in Toronto in 2013. The founders say it will be the first major educational and exhibition center in North America dedicated to Muslim arts and culture.

Much of the writing displayed comes from Korans. Scribes faced the daunting task of precisely copying the Muslim holy book and in a way became early page designers, deciding how to present the material in the most harmonious arrangement in the space available.

In one striking example, from the so-called Blue Koran, thought to have been made in North Africa in or before the 10th century, letters in gold script practically pop from a page of vellum that had been dyed with indigo.

Other items on display at first seem less overtly religious in nature, like an earthenware vase, ceramic tiles, or a rock crystal necklace, but their inscriptions speak of blessings, or of giving praise and sovereignty to God.

A brass “beggar’s bowl” decorated with dragon heads from 16th-century Iran also filled a religious role in that it was likely used by a dervish who had renounced worldly goods and survived by collecting alms from generous strangers. The bowl is also decorated with inscriptions and floral engravings.

An Ottoman ivory and gold box, with turquoise and ruby inlays, “is not only both valuable and rare, but of great historical interest as it was made in Istanbul for Suleiman the Magnificent, by Iranian craftsmen working in Turkey,” Benoît Junod of the museums and exhibitions unit of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture in Geneva wrote in an interview by e-mail.

The most ethereal setting in the show — a cocoon formed by long, flowing white curtains — is given to a 16th-century pierced-steel plate that at first resembles a Turkish tulip with elongated petals. This Shia alam, or standard, which is a type of banner sometimes used during religious processions, is carved with religious inscriptions and decorated with dragon heads, much like the beggar’s bowl.

Another dramatic display involves a wall covered with an image of a folio of the Kitabkhana — a library and workshop for copying books — showing how scribes, illustrators, paper-makers and binders organized their craft.

Other treasures include examples of translations of classic scientific texts into Arabic, like pages from “De Materia Medica,” a first-century Greek manuscript written by a doctor named Dioscorides on the medicinal properties of plants. The page describing the poppy, for example, explains how to grow the flowers and how to harvest opium from them.

While images of people are rare in early Islamic art, they do appear in many of the texts on display, notably in a handful of pages of miniatures from the Shah Tahmasp version of the epic poem Shahnama, or “Book of Kings,” recounting the history of Iran.

“This fantastic manuscript is considered by most experts to contain the most accomplished artworks in Persian history,” Mr. Junot wrote.

The book was given to the Ottoman Sultan Selim II in 1568 along with other gifts borne on 34 camels, according to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The full manuscript had been housed in Topkapi Palace in Istanbul until early in the 20th century, but today its pages are separated and in the hands of various museums and private collectors.

Another rare manuscript is that of “101 Nights,” the less famous counterpart to the tales told by Scheherazade in “1,001 Nights,” and written in the Maghribi script of Spain and North Africa. Just 85 of the 101 stories are intact here, but the collection is thought by many experts to be the oldest known copy of the tales.

For those who share the collectors' reverence for written material, the exhibit includes examples of the implements used by Ottoman scribes, including steel scissors inlaid with gold, a floral-decorated cylinder for holding pens and a silver inkwell with a turquoise stud.

There are also lacquered pen holders and a rather glorious tool box, a wooden scribe's cabinet from late 15th- or 16th-century Spain, made of walnut with inlaid bone and mother-of-pearl and decorated with motifs that also appear at the Alhambra, in the Spanish city of Granada.

The exhibition will travel on to the State [Hermitage Museum](#), in St. Petersburg; the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, in Kuala Lumpur; and the Asian Civilizations Museum, in Singapore. It culminates in a show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art before the entire collection of more than 1,000 items is transferred to Toronto.