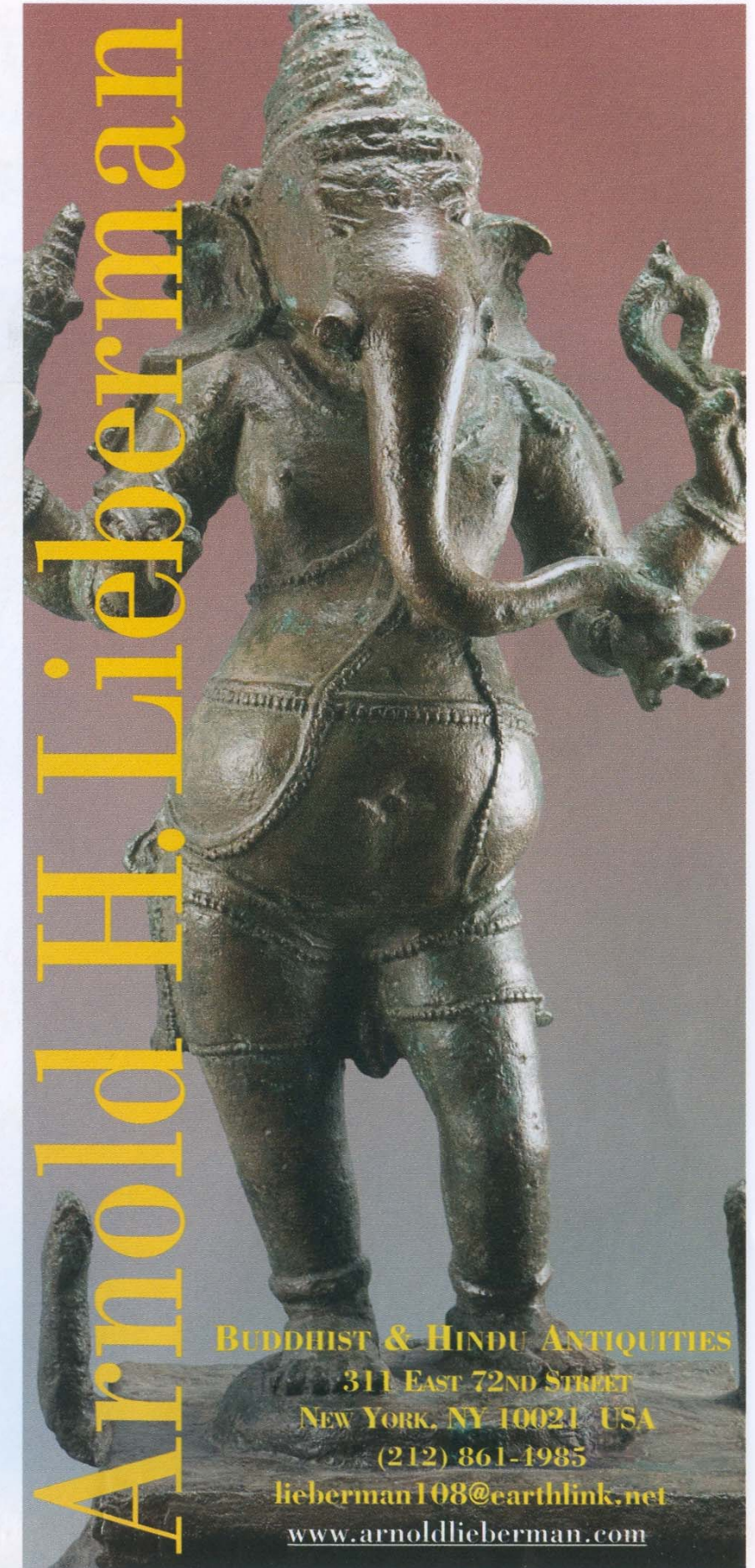




# Bridging The Gulf

The Arts of Islam exhibition puts a well-known collection into a novel, new setting



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The 'Gulf war of culture' is heating up. The two giants of the region are Dubai and Abu Dhabi, although their combined native populations are only a few hundred thousand. So far they have not set the world ablaze with their own artistic contribution, but they are both importing art at an impressive rate. Next-door neighbours Qatar and Sharjah are also taking up the challenge.

In Dubai there has been the fair Art and Antiques Dubai in February and Art Dubai in March. Abu Dhabi is putting most of its faith in the future. There is the promise of Louvre and Guggenheim franchises. The current highlight is an exhibition called *The Arts of Islam: Treasures from the Nasser D. Khalili Collection*. Representing a small portion of the Khalili collection, this is still an exceptional package. The most established museums of Europe and America are the only rivals to this peerless private collection.

Khalili has no doubts about which emirate he has the most confidence in: 'For the last two years, Abu Dhabi has shown itself to be the leader of art and culture in the Gulf. It was obvious that it would be the ideal place to have the exhibition'. The exhibition is on the second leg of its world tour. This started at the Art Gallery of New South Wales last year and continues this month in Abu Dhabi. Khalili confirms that he is still looking for a permanent home for the collection, and that he has no intention of selling it. The next stop has yet to be determined, but there should be no shortage of takers for a show that comes with the finest artefacts and some superior scholarship. As always with the Khalili collection, the accompanying catalogue is engagingly written and beautiful to behold.

The first surprise with the exhibition is that it takes place in a hotel. This is of course the Persian Gulf, a region with the world's top contender to six-star status. There are not a lot of museums to go round, yet. Instead there are dazzling hotels. The venue for *The Arts of Islam* is as glossy as would be expected and is currently offering an Easter package – a treat to be savoured in this cosmopolitan corner of the Muslim world. The function rooms at the Emirates Palace Hotel also provide a calming and unobtrusive backdrop

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**HOKKAH BASE AND MOUTHPIECE**, India, Mewar, early 18th century, enamelled gold, height 27 cm

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**RUSTAM, AIDED BY HIS HORSE RAKSH, SLAYS A DRAGON** from the *Shanamah* (Book of Kings) of Firdawsi, made for Shah Tahmasp., Iran, Tabriz, 1520s, ink, gold and opaque watercolour on paper, 47 x 31.8 cm



**CERAMIC FIGURINE OF A DROMEDARY**, Iran, Kashan, 13th century, decorated in lustre over a white glaze, height 39.5 cm



for an exhibition. The lighting and display are well up to the world's leading museums, and the levels of cleanliness are probably higher.

Being in a hotel certainly has not put visitors off. The exhibition has done well, just as it did when touring Australia, where it brought in more than a thousand visitors a day. The catalogue sold out, which is a rare event. The catalogue in Abu Dhabi is bigger, like the exhibition itself, which has grown by more than 25 percent. While expanding, the exhibition has remained mercifully free of the restrictions that might have been imposed in neighbouring Saudi Arabia. Items of Shi'a origin are displayed alongside orthodox Sunni artefacts. The Abu Dhabi cover is, however, different from the prototype. The Australian version is peopled with angels and the full human repertoire that some believe to contravene a saying of the Prophet Muhammad that appears to prohibit the representation of living beings. Another hadith is used proudly as part of the exhibition title, 'God is beautiful and loves beauty', sending a more positive message. The Abu Dhabi cover features a depopulated image of Mecca, painted in 1843 and offering a refreshingly different view of both the holiest city and the art of Islam.

The quest for originality is also present in the exhibition. Islamic art tends to fall into certain well-established groupings. These are all on display and include some of the finest examples of their type in existence. Many seem like old friends, encountered occasionally around the world. Some items are becoming positively iconic, although I dread using that word, especially in an Islamic context. At the same time there are items of admirable novelty. Among the most striking is an 8th-10th human-headed jug from Iran, which looks almost pre-Columbian. From the same era is an Egyptian woollen tunic in the sort of condition that only happens in desert environments. Its combination of blue and gold is bold, unexpected and similar to one of the essentials of the Khalili holdings;



**FLAT-WOVEN CARPET** (kilim), Turkey or Iran, 16th or 17 century, silk with metal thread, 212 x 84 cm



**BOWL WITH INSCRIPTION** 'Generosity is the disposition of the dwellers of Paradise', Iran, Nishpur, 10th century, earthenware, painted in red and black under a colourless glaze, diam. 25.6 cm

pages from the *Blue Qur'an* are Islamic art at its most transcendent. Keeping things simple, its dyed blue pages provide the depth of an Yves Klein painting against which the gold writing shimmers celestially.

Every great collection needs a leaf or two from the *Blue Qur'an*, created a thousand years ago. At the opposite extreme of size are some of the massive items on display at this exhibition. A wooden cenotaph from Iran is large and intricate, showing the virtuosity of Muslim woodworkers, which is less often displayed than other media. Its inscription gives not only a date (1496-97) but also a prayer to the Shi'a Imams. Even larger are the *kiswah* cloth covers from the Kaaba in Mecca. As these are renewed every year, they have entered private collections but are very rare and stunningly ornate. For non-Muslims this as close to being in Mecca, the heart of Islam, as they will be able to get.

All the classic genres are on display. Ceramics, metalwork and above all the written word are

in abundance. It could be my imagination, but I sensed that weapons were some way from the limelight. This has become a more common practice as the emphasis is increasingly put on the peaceful side of Islam. A perennial gripe of mine is the absence from most Islamic-art collections of items from the 'margins' of the Islamic world. Out of the almost 500 exhibits in the exhibition, I could only see one from sub-Saharan Africa. This is a region that has undoubtedly grabbed the world's attention recently, so it was good to find that at least one Qur'an had made it into the inventory. Like so much from this part of Africa, its appeal lies in its energy rather than sophistication. China also manages one object. For Southeast Asia – home to the world's largest Muslim population – the showing is smaller. Khalili has not overlooked this point: 'We try to represent most of the Muslim and Islamic countries and their cultural contribution. Considering that there is much less from China and Southeast Asia than other Muslim regions, the representation was adequate'.

One day they will win their place in the Islamic-art sun, but in the meantime the emphasis is very much on the heartlands of the Middle East, Iran and India. This makes for a colourful outing at The Arts of Islam, especially when one reaches the Mughal empire section. For lovers of jewellery, the conclusion of the exhibition shows how seriously the Islamic world has taken its mission to uphold God's radiant beauty. Abu Dhabi provides an appropriately stunning and sunny setting.

**LUCIEN DE GUISE**

The Arts of Islam: Treasures from the Nasser D. Khalili Collection is on show at Emirates Palace Hotel, Abu Dhabi until 22 April. Catalogue available: first published by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, [www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au) and republished and expanded for this exhibition by Tourism Development & Investment Company (TDIC), Abu Dhabi, [www.tdic.ae](http://www.tdic.ae)