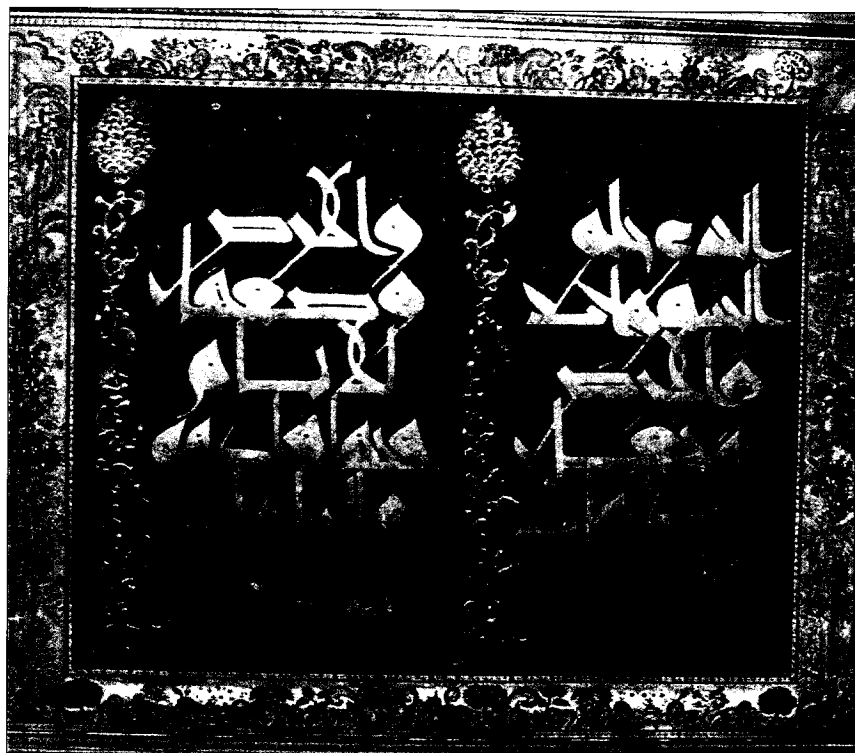


## ARTS & SOCIETY



*The Creation II* by Syrian artist Khairat Saleh; 10th-century clay bowl from Iran.



JOHN SAMITES

### CULTURE

# Insight Into Islam

US museums reflect a growing interest in Muslim history and art

By Lee Adair Lawrence

Few express it better than Mustafa Malik, director of research at the American Muslim Council in Washington: "Most Americans, when they think of Islam, think of the Crusades, the Iranian hostage crisis, fighting in the Middle East and terrorism. But these are incidents. Mainstream Islam has not yet been presented to America."

True enough in the past, that reality may now be changing. Imams have recently held prayers in the US Senate, the House of Representatives and at last January's presidential inauguration. And in December, the armed forces inducted its first Muslim chaplain. But the most dramatic vehicle for the country's increased awareness of Islam has not been in the halls of congress but in the art world, where a mini-boom of programmes focused on the religion has occurred.

In Washington, for example, Nancy Mathews, vice-president for arts at Meridian International Centre, consciously uses

her exhibitions to challenge, provoke and educate. In March, Meridian will inaugurate *Building Bridges*, featuring the works of six Palestinian and six Israeli artists.

Susan Fisher Sterling, curator of modern contemporary art for the National Museum of Women in the Arts, similarly uses art as an "international communicator." In February, her museum will host a show featuring 160 works by 70 Arab women in 15 countries.

The burst of interest in Islam by museums is hardly surprising given recent demographics. The American Muslim community is now the country's fastest growing religious minority, likely to surpass its Jewish counterpart by early next century. But Muslims living in the US are not all from the Middle East. Indeed, only 12% of the country's estimated 4 million Muslims are Arabs. According to a study published by American Muslim Council, US-born descendants of African slaves form the largest group of American Muslims (42%), followed by South and South-east Asians (26%).

Whatever their ethnic and cultural background, Muslims are united in drawing inspiration and guidance from the Koran. To showcase that reality, another museum, the Smithsonian's Sackler Gallery, is now hosting *The Divine Word of Islam*, which presents pages from the Koran written in Egypt, Iran and Turkey between the 14th and 18th centuries. "I wanted to concentrate on the Koran," explains Marianna Shreve Simpson, the Sackler's curator for Islamic Near Eastern Art. "I wanted to focus on its contents, and how the Koran as the fundamental expression of the faith led to beautiful copies of itself."

To be sure, this is not the first time the Smithsonian — America's national museum — has shown Islamic art. Its Freer Gallery hosts a permanent display of works from Islamic cultures, and, like other prominent institutions, it has periodically mounted shows on the artistic and philosophical traditions of Islam.

Ironically, rather than make Americans more aware of Islam, much of the homage offered in the past may have inadvertently

bolstered the idea that the only culture Islam has to offer is dead. Today's shows provide a historical and religious context that enables the public to better appreciate contemporary Muslim art and culture.

The Sackler exhibition, for example, illuminates the consistent use of Arabic in Islam. For Muslims, and especially American converts such as Amatullah Sharif Okakpu, who accepted Islam 24 years ago, the consistency of language holds much more than academic importance. "The Arabic in the Koran has never, ever been changed from 1,400 years ago," she exclaims. "Therefore we have the same information that was given to Prophet Muhammad through the Angel Gabriel — and that's heavy duty!"

Among African-Americans, Arabic also holds a different significance. "Our history and our legacy were stolen from us," says Ajab Abdussamad, responsible for communications at the first mosque built by the African-American community, the Masjid Muhammad in Washington. Like many others, he believes that almost all slaves forcibly brought to the US in the 17th-18th centuries were Muslims who were not allowed to practice their faith. "So we felt compelled to reach back and reclaim our history and, as part of this process, we adopted Arabic names."

Although historical data actually suggests that the proportion of Muslims among imported slaves hovered around 10%, Islam nevertheless restored individual pride and history to its African-American converts. One of the organizations that helped instill that strength was the Nation of Islam, founded in 1933 by Elijah Muhammad. Preaching that there was no life after death, Muhammad called for the separation of the races, declared God was human and posited himself as the last messenger of God. Although his son, Warith Deen Mohammed, later repudiated many of his father's teachings as contradictory to Islam, much of the racist labels from the organization's early days remain.

Whether or not a part of the Nation of Islam, African-American Muslims have had to contend with the misconception that they are not "real Muslims," even though every Friday they pray side by side with other Muslims in the country's 1,100 mosques.

Media attention focused on American Muslims has also failed to address the African-American community, making Okakpu and others feel overlooked. That is a feeling artists from foreign Islamic cul-

tures understand well. Gulgee, a prominent Pakistani painter whose works were recently shown in a father-and-son exhibition at Meridian, is baffled by the ignorance in America of contemporary art in the so-called Third World. "This is the essence of 40 years going inward," he says, surveying

lem and take it one step further. It offers more than non-Western modern work, opting to destroy the prevailing misconceptions about Muslim women. "The perception [in the US] is almost one of barbarism," says Sterling. "It becomes very difficult for the women artists of the Arab world to work in conditions where we in the West think of them as somehow less than ourselves."

To that end, the show resonates with history — a history that illustrates the unprecedented rights Islam accorded women as early as the first century. It is no coincidence, many Muslims point out, that the first true saint of Islam was a woman, Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya, and that in the ninth and 10th centuries Arab women excelled as calligraphers and poets, just as their successors both influenced and created literature and music. Muslim women even took an active part, and in some cases led, the national movements of the 19th century.

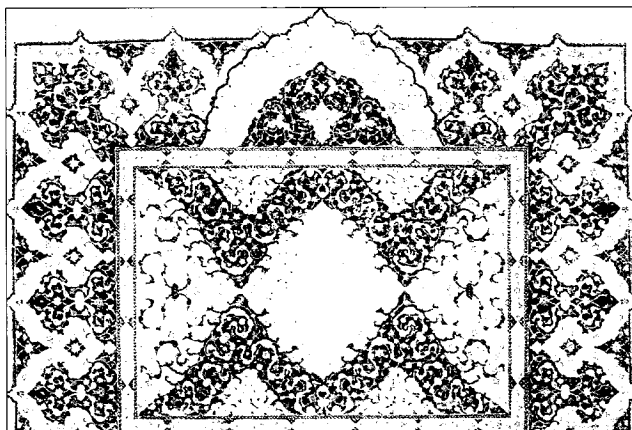
Repressive Muslim societies still exist, of course, but the show proves that Muslim women have not been uniformly silenced. "One very effective tool for many of these artists," says the curator, Salwa Mikdadi Nashashibi, "is calligraphy," which shows up in abstract works, collages and other pieces that join the written word with painting.

The dissimilarities among these works will also carry a message across America: that Islam, like other cultures, permutes and adapts to new environments. As though to reinforce

this point, the Smithsonian's Museum of African Art and the Sackler Gallery are planning an ambitious thematic exhibition for April 1996. Drawing from the diverse Islamic cultures in Asia, Africa and the Middle East, its curators hope to highlight similarities and differences in various aspects of life, culture and society from the distant origins of Islam to the present.

Muslims may never entirely shed their reputation as militants — after all, the Prophet Muhammad stands out among founders of major religions for having led troops into battle. But many feel that the political climate and demographic realities make this the opportune time to counter the labels of "barbarian" or "fanatic." In other words, it may be time for Mainstream America to shake hands with Mainstream Islam. And the best place to make the introduction might just be a museum. ■

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Folio from a Koran (Iran or Turkey, 16th century).



Pakistani painter Gulgee with one of his works.



Gulgee's Cube.

canvases he has filled with fiercely expressive and personal calligraphy.

The forthcoming exhibition of Arab works at the National Museum of Women in the Arts is designed to address that prob-