

A Royal Gift

By Victoria Scott
Photos courtesy of the Qatar Museums Authority

The Museum of Islamic Art explores the act of gift-giving in the Islamic Courts with its latest travelling exhibit 'Gifts of the Sultan'. **QH** delves into the past to examine how these simple gestures of honouring and respect transcend through the ages to remain an important part of the culture of the Arab world.

We all love presents. Indeed, the act of giving and receiving gifts – and the pleasure it gives us – is a universal experience. No matter where we come from in the world and no matter what our faith or ethnicity, a beautiful, thoughtful present is a joy to us all.

It's this delightful part of human nature that's celebrated in the Museum of Islamic Art's new temporary exhibition, 'Gifts of the Sultan: The Arts of Giving at the Islamic Courts.' On show is Islamic art gifted from the 8th century until the modern day. The collection, which was conceived by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), was first shown in L.A. and then Houston before opening its doors in Doha in March.

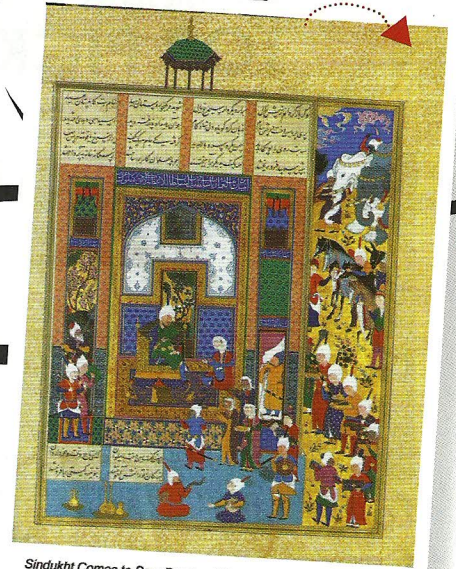
Qatar's exhibition is somewhat unique, however. Visitors in Doha can see an additional 16 works from the MIA's own collection, and crucially can also see a selection of objects on loan from The State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, Russia. William Greenwood, curatorial co-ordinator at the MIA for the Doha exhibition, explains. "As exhibitions go from place to place, they tend to change,



Cameo
India, 17th century
Sardonyx with enamelled gold setting
2.58 x 2.78 in. (6.7 x 7.2 cm)
Bibliothèque nationale de France, Cabinet de Médailles, Paris
(Babelon 366, Camée 366 RCA-69937)
Photo courtesy Bibliothèque Nationale de France

reflecting both different exhibition spaces and the requirements of the lenders. The MIA was lucky enough to get loans from Russian institutions which the American venues couldn't get, as well as introducing a much larger number of pieces from the MIA collection."

Consequently, visitors to the MIA exhibition are the first to see the collection as it was originally envisaged. And what a treat it is. Despite the dim lighting



Sindukht Comes to Sam Bearing Gifts
Folio from the Shahnama of Shah Tahmasp, Iran, Tabriz, 1525–35
18 3/8 x 12 3/8 in. (46.5 x 31.2 cm)
Aga Khan Museum Collection, Geneva (AKM00496)
Photo © Aga Khan Trust for Culture, Geneva

(necessary to preserve the ancient artifacts on show), the jewels glisten and the gold glows. Age has certainly not withered the beauty of these objects.

The show is divided into three broad sections: personal gifts, religious donations and diplomatic gifts. I'm drawn into the personal gifts section, an enclosed area decorated with arches which deliberately echo I.M. Pei's now iconic design for the MIA. Here there are some stunning pieces of jewellery, with ornate solid gold belts particularly catching my eye. There's also an impressive brass celestial globe - a three-dimensional map of the stars - made in Iran



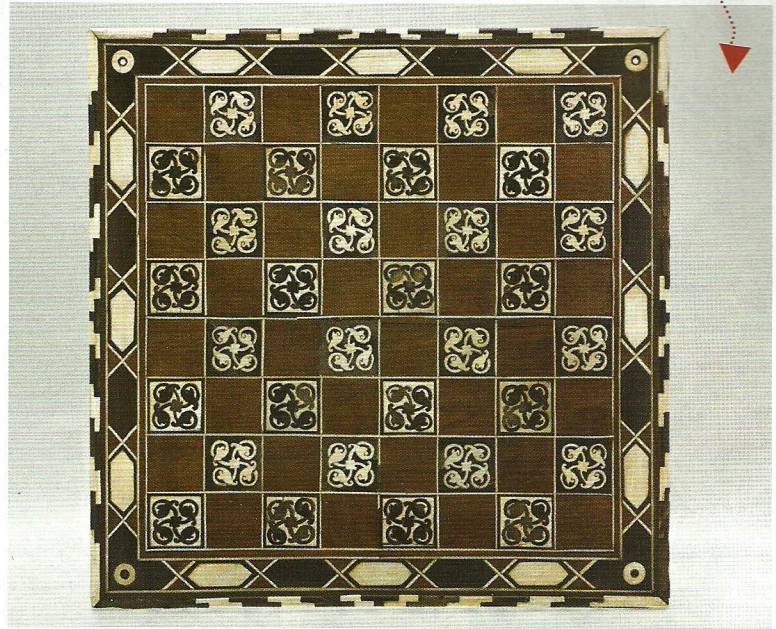
Globe
Turkey, 16th-17th century
Brass
Rustic iron stand with gold and red with enamelled and silver, iron or bronze
2.2 x 4.2 in. (5.6 x 10.7 cm)
The Aga Khan Collection, Cur. al-Athar al-Islamiyyah, Kuwait (AKC 7 145)
Copyright © The Aga Khan Collection, Cur. al-Athar al-Islamiyyah, Kuwait

in the 13th century and eventually gifted to British soldier Sir John Malcolm in the 19th century, on loan from the British Museum. The stories these objects have to tell must be myriad.

Next, I examine the diplomatic gifts. Amongst this treasure trove there are ancient chess and backgammon boards, bejewelled daggers, and intricately embroidered clothing. There's also a section dedicated to animals given as gifts and it seems exotic beasts were the order of the day. One drawing, dating back to the 15th century, shows Timur, the Central Asian warlord, being presented with a giraffe, the first time he'd encountered such an animal. Also in this section are prints showing human gifts – concubines and slaves, a sad reminder of less enlightened times.

Finally, I move to the section showing pious donations. These include beautiful furnishings and manuscripts of the Qur'an which were part of the endowment of a religious institution through a charitable trust (waqf.) Most impressive of all for me is a door covering for the Ka'ba, the cubical building at the centre of the great mosque in Mecca. The Ka'ba is draped annually with a new embroidered veil (kiswa), and supplying this covering is a great honour. This example is the door curtain (sitara), made in Egypt in the 19th century. It's five metres high and nearly three metres wide, made of black silk embroidered with silver wire with red and green silk appliqué. It's stunning.

Then at the end, a surprise. The show's curators asked four modern artists to produce new work interpreting the show's theme and the results are striking. The stand-out piece to my mind is 'Always in our Thoughts' by Iraqi artist Sadegh Tirafkan. Deported from Iraq to Iran at the age of six and a member of the youth militia in the Iran-Iraq War, Tirafkan experienced loss at an early age. Tirafkan's contribution to the exhibition is a collection of columns standing over two metres high, each lit up, covered in cloth and glass, and containing a photograph of someone the artist has lost. He's referencing an Iranian tradition



Chessboard
 Egypt, 14th or 15th century
 Wood inlaid with ebony and ivory
 18 7/8 x 18 7/8 x 8 3/8 in. (47.9 x 47.9 x 21.3 cm)
 Benaki Museum, Athens (10033)
 Photo courtesy Benaki Museum, by Tsonis

of erecting temporary shrines to their dead; he says this is a gift from the living to the dead to preserve their memory. It's a moving work that packs a real punch.

It's a very personal end to what is, in effect, a personal exhibition, as it's a collection of

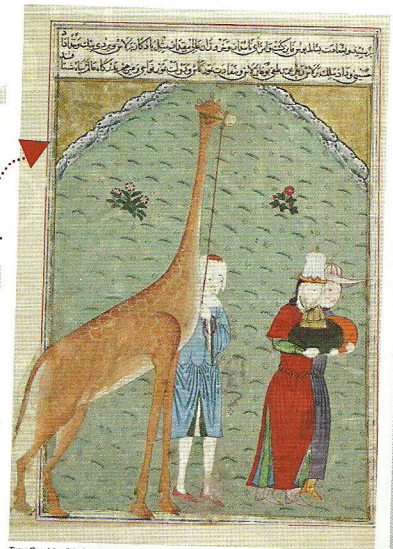
gifts given from one person to another, clearly with a great deal of thought involved. A universal human experience that leads, says Greenwood, to a show with universal appeal, suitable for all ages and cultures.

"The show's strength is that it approaches Islamic art - something which many people

don't know about and might not think that they were interested in - via a concept which has universal appeal - giving and receiving gifts," he tells me. "It focuses on what unites people rather than what separates them. Children will love it too - especially the animal gifts section. The focus on the objects themselves, rather than lots of explanatory text, also makes it more child-friendly." ●

"It focuses on what unites people rather than what separates them."

Gifts of the Sultan: The Arts of Giving at the Islamic Courts is open at the Museum of Islamic Art until June 2nd. Tickets are QR 25 and children under 16 and students can enter for free. Visit www.mia.org.qa for more information.



Timur Receiving Gifts from the Egyptian Ambassadors
 Left-hand folio (fol. 309b) of a double-page composition from a manuscript of the Zafarnama of Sharaf al-Din 'A
 Yazd, Shiraz, AH 714/1313-1314
 Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper
 12 3/4 x 15 1/2 in. (32.4 x 39.1 cm)
 Worcester Art Museum (1935.26)
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