

Culture

Keir Collection of Islamic Art shines at Dallas Museum of Art

Mary Sebold

Washington

At dinner in London a few years ago, Sabiha al-Khemir announced her appointment as the first senior adviser for Islamic art at the Dallas Museum of Art (DMA). A colleague laughed. Didn't Khemir know there was no Islamic art in Texas?

Khemir said she knew that if she went to Dallas there would be Islamic art. A native of Tunisia, she was founding director of the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar, which opened in 2008. She is a writer, illustrator and scholar whose self-professed goal is to build bridges between cultures. Early in her career, she served as a consultant to the seminal exhibit *Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain*, which showed at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1992.

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Jim Falk, president and CEO of the World Affairs Council of Dallas/Fort Worth

This past April, Khemir and the DMA opened a gallery for rotating exhibits from the Keir Collection, one of the most historically and geographically comprehensive private holdings of Islamic art.

“For me, it was such a personal thing. I didn't have peace until I got the Keir Collection to the museum,” Khemir said. In the United States, only the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington house more Islamic art than the DMA.

Khemir negotiated a 15-year loan from Richard de Unger, whose father, Edmund, started acquiring Islamic art in the 1950s after immigrating to England from Hungary. He named the collection after Keir on Wimbledon Common, his first home in London. The collection includes approximately 2,000 treasures and is particularly known for its lustre ceramic ware and carved rock crystal. The DMA plans to exhibit 150 pieces at a time. Most of the art has never been shown in a museum setting.

Intentionally located just past the information desk on the first floor, visitors cannot miss the gallery. Light fills the rooms. Specialists and newbies, locals and tourists journey past Quranic manuscripts; Persian miniature paintings and a priceless rock crystal ewer to a room full of lustreware set in a solar pattern. The gallery features textiles, Edmund de Unger's first interest. Designers organised the works by medium, then theme, such as Islam's influence on the West's renaissance.

“The balance, proportion, refinement and elegance of the gallery makes you go quiet. A guard told me he'd be happy to be locked in at night,” said Khemir, who said she often roams the gallery incognito. She found a woman mumbling to herself in French, surprised that Dallas had Islamic art. Spiritually moved, an Iranian doctoral student burst into tears.

Even Richard de Unger, a spe-

cialist in his own right, was left lost for words.

“As president and CEO of the World Affairs Council of Dallas/Fort Worth, I have had the privilege of taking a number of Arabs through the collection,” said Jim Falk, who supported bringing the masterpieces to Texas, which has the fifth largest population of Muslims in the United States.

■ The Dallas Museum of Art plans to exhibit 150 pieces at a time.

“Their surprise is uniform. The fact that the collection spans so many countries and ages is rare and gives even people from the region a greater appreciation of their history and civilisation,” Falk said.

Most visitors head for the rock crystal ewer from the Fatimid period (909-1171) of Egypt. They take a magnifying glass next to the case and peer into one of the ewer's carved roundels. No matter which spot they choose, they see reflected the splendid cheetah that dominates the surface of the ewer. Experts are still trying to figure out how its creator accomplished the feat. At the time, scientists and artists in the area were fascinated by light and optics.

“The ewer reminds us that we don't see everything visible,” Khemir said.

The same could be said for one of her favourite pieces, the Homburg ewer made in Syria in 1242 by Ahmad al-Dhaki, a metalworker from Mosul in present-day Iraq. Brass inlaid with silver, it features scenes of Islamic courtly life on the upper half and Christian saints and clergy on the lower. It embodies the cultural diversity of Iraq. If you



Priceless. Crystal ewer from the Keir Collection.

(Courtesy of DMA)

remove one part of the ewer or the country, you destroy what it was.

“What creates fear is not knowing,” Khemir said. “I think what the gallery is trying to do is to open the eye and the heart. We didn't plan to open the exhibit in an anti-Muslim context but it's all the more helpful and needed now. We need to put a face to Islamic histo-

ry and the centuries of beauty that spilled out to Europe and all over.

“We must get to know the other and stop talking about Islamic culture without really knowing what it is.”

Mary Sebold is a Washington-based contributor to The Arab Weekly.

Continued growth of Arabic outside Arab heartlands

Fadi Farhat

London

A major polemic has been ignited in Nigerian educational policy in relation to the teaching of Arabic as a foreign language option instead of French. This has caused concern among residents of southern Nigeria, where language has been equated with religious affiliation and indoctrination.

These concerns are unfounded because the option for pupils to choose Arabic over French has been around for a while, even if the matter only recently attracted public debate.

What the public debate in Nigeria has done is to show the growing appetite for Arabic both as a regional lingua franca and as a minority language outside traditional Arab heartlands. Despite this, there is a chronic lack of funding from mainstream Arab countries to promote the Arabic language in areas where Arabic remains vibrant and

alive. Many northern Nigerians are conversant with Arabic script and with basic Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) or classical Arabic grammar.

■ The emergence of Arabic in areas outside traditional Arab League is staggering.

When South Sudan declared independence in July 2011, there were wholesale policy plans to supplant the local dialect of Arabic (known as Juba Arabic) and replace

it with Swahili. Six years later, Juba Arabic is as present as ever and South Sudan in 2014 applied to join the Arab League.

Arabic remains strong in Chad and the so-called transnational Baggara Belt across central Africa where there are 3 million speakers in the Darfur region, more than 2 million speakers in Chad, nearly 300,000 speakers in Nigeria as well as, phenomenally, approximately 170,000 speakers in Cameroon, 150,000 speakers in Niger and a further 107,000 speakers of Arabic in the Central African Republic.

Arabic has status as a national language, recognised constitutionally, in Eritrea and Senegal, where its presence, understandably, is the least prominent in a Francophone society. In the Western Sahara and Mauritania, the local Hassaniya dialect of Arabic has spread into neighbouring north-western Mali.

Arabic remains a minority language in southern Turkey and southern Iran in the province of Khuzestan.

The continued growth and emergence of Arabic outside the traditional Arab League region is staggering. It means that Arabic is spoken continuously across a distance covering one-seventh of the Earth's latitudinal surface if one counts from the easternmost tip of Oman in the east to the shores of the Atlantic Ocean on the beaches of the Western Sahara. Not many – if any – languages can make that claim across one continuous area.

Factoring in the areas where Arabic is spoken in non-Arab League countries, the total land area of the

language's reach far exceeds the size of the whole of Europe (with all its languages) even if one uses the easternmost definition of Europe that ventures beyond Moscow and to the Kazakh border.

The growth and emergence of Arabic outside traditional Arab heartlands such as Mali, Niger and Northern Nigeria has been fuelled by commerce, Arabic's flexible dialectology and religious commitment as opposed to pedagogical measures to consolidate this growth.

■ More funding will be necessary given the growing appetite for Arabic in Africa and Asia.

Funding, to promote the growth of Arabic at any level in these areas, remains non-existent and Arab powerhouses such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt (the two most influential Arab countries) have invested in humanitarian projects and religious education but with very little emphasis on linguistic education and development.

Given the growing appetite for Arabic across parts of Africa and Asia, such funding will become necessary to foster and consolidate the language's presence. For this to happen, either one of the Arab powerhouses must take initiative or the Arab League must formulate a set of feasible educational policies.

Fadi Farhat is a lawyer based in Britain.



Alive and well. A Syrian refugee Adel Bakkour teaches Arabic in Rio de Janeiro, on April 20.

(AFP)