

Remarkable beauty, fascinating tales

Treasures from the Aga Khan Museum offer **Aneeta Sundararaj** an insight into architecture in Islamic arts

UNTIL June 29, Malaysians are the recipient of a rare treat — a travelling exhibition called *Treasures Of The Aga Khan Museum: Architecture In Islamic Arts* displayed for the first time in Southeast Asia at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia.

"The exhibition focuses on Islamic architecture as manifested in art which has flourished across the Islamic world for over 1,400 years," says Dr Heba Nayel Barakat, the head of Curatorial Affairs at the museum.

She explains that the 100 masterpieces on display here have been selected out of the 1,000-odd pieces that belong to the collection of the Aga Khan Museum.

The exhibition will be divided into six sections and it's soon clear that Heba has clear favourites. In the opening section called "Sacred Topographies", sites and monu-

ments of Islamic pilgrimage are explored through paintings and drawings. There are representations of the Kaaba and the Masjid al-Haram circulated from the medieval period in manuscripts, pilgrimage manuals and certificates.

Tombs and shrines represent some of the greatest monuments built in the Islamic lands and the section on "Religious And Funerary Architecture" exemplifies this.

"One of the most beautiful pieces in this collection is an Abbasid wooden beam," explains Heba. It dates back to the 9th Century AD and is a treasure because wood was very scarce in North Africa. This one comes from a mosque and it was the buffer that connected the arches together for stability. This beam displays an inscription from



Muqarnas, a system of small, tiered honeycomb vaulting from Spain



Panel of four Iznik tiles

THE MALAYSIAN TOUCH

IN the last 30 odd years, the Aga Khan Award for Architecture has been awarded every three years. Malaysia has been the recipient of this award six times. In conjunction with *Treasures Of The Aga Khan Museum: Architecture In Islamic Arts* exhibition, the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia has created a complimentary display that features these winning structures. They are:

1. Tanjung Jara Beach Hotel and Rantau Abang Visitors Center, Terengganu (1981-1983); Wimberly, Whisenand, Allison, Tong and Goo with Akitek Bersekutu.
2. Menara Mesiniaga, Selangor (1993-1995); T.R. Hamzah and Yeang
3. Salinger Residence, Selangor (1996-1998); Jimmy C.S. Lim.
4. The Datai, Pulau Langkawi (1999-2001); Kerri Hill & Akitek Jururancang
5. Petronas Towers, Kuala Lumpur (2002-2004); Cesar Pelli and Associates & KLCC Development Projects
6. University of Technology Petronas, Perak (2005-2007); Foster+Partners and GDP Architects

the Holy Quran and is the floral Kufic script.

Another exhibit from this section is titled *Candlestick With Repousse Designs*. It dates to the 12th Century and is said to originate from an area roughly comprising modern-day Iran. The Repousse technique involves beating shapes into sheet metal from the reverse side. There was enormous religious significance attached to light. This explains why making light fittings for mosques, tombs and shrines was considered a sacred act.

Heba's favourite item in the next section is a beautifully painted folio from a manuscript that chronicles the adventures of a young prince. Since this section of the exhibition is about *Fortress And The City*, the story in the folio is that of "Shah Ramin And His Companions Before The Marvellous City Of Dar ul Bedam". The story is about the young prince,

Shah Ramin, and his companions' arrival at a beautiful citadel in this city.

"Look at how they raise their fingers to their lips," suggests Heba. "They're so astonished by how beautiful this building is." The citadel is guarded by four immense towers. "These towers seem similar to the balconied minarets of an Ottoman imperial mosque. When the prince opens the gates of the citadel with a magical key, water comes flooding out. It almost drowns him. But, as the hero, he survives and goes on to have another adventure."

In the section that showcases the royal residences, Heba points to the decorative tile works used to cover the floors and walls of these structures. Of particular interest is the "Panel Of Four Iznik Tiles" from 16th Century Turkey.

"I like the pattern of long, tapered and serrated leaves. These leaves are known as 'saz' leaves," Heba says. In

Treasures Of The Aga Khan Museum:

Museum: Architecture In Islamic Arts
Where: Special Gallery 2, Islamic Arts Museum, Jalan Lembah Perdana, Kuala Lumpur
When: Till June 29 (Opens daily from 10am to 6pm)
Website: <http://www.iamm.org.my>

the impressive catalogue that accompanies the exhibition, it's stated that such patterns were common in tiles produced in the Imperial Ottoman workshops.

It is impossible to leave this section without noticing a form of decoration that is immediately and exclusively associated with Islamic architecture: Muqarnas. Described as a "system of small, tiered 'honeycomb' vaulting ...used on squinches, capitals, niche hoods, cornices and other architectural surfaces," the one on display is from 15th Century Spain. It is octagonal in shape and was probably used as a centrepiece.

One of the things immediately synonymous with Islamic architecture is tents. This is highlighted in a folio belonging to another manuscript in the section of the exhibition about *Gardens, Pavillions And Tents*. The folio is called "Salm And Tur Receive The Reply From Faridun And Manuchihr" and tells the story of two brothers, Salm and Tur. Seated in their tent, they are receiving the envoy from their father's court. He is not pleased and has promised to wage war on them.



Candlestick With Repoussé Designs Khurasan (north-eastern Iran/Afghanistan), possibly Herat, late 12th or 13th Century chased and beaten brass



Kilga (Jar Stand) Egypt (probably Cairo), possibly 12th Century carved marble

"Look at the way the face of one brother is angled. It's as though he's saying to his brother, 'I told you so!'" says Heba.

What is important is that this folio is a royal production. "It was the work of an organised experienced and distinguished atelier. It was produced for Shah Tahmasp of Tabriz from Persia and sent to the

Ottoman Sultan as a gift."

In the final section of the exhibition, *Architecture And The Written Word*, the focus is on architectural spaces contained in miniature paintings. Heba explains that the extensive use of the written word as a form of decoration in almost all Islamic cultures meant that the walls of buildings have, at times,

also functioned as surfaces for the inscription of text.

This exhibition, which took close to a year to put together, offers insights and new perspectives into Islamic civilisations. The elements of architecture that showcase majestic domes, peaceful courtyards and towering minarets, serve as a unifying element in Islamic art

and heritage.

"We want to capture the attention of young architects and introduce them to the history of Islamic art forms and art," Heba explains. In so doing, she hopes that the exhibition will not only foster knowledge within Muslim societies, but also between the Muslim societies and other cultures.

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