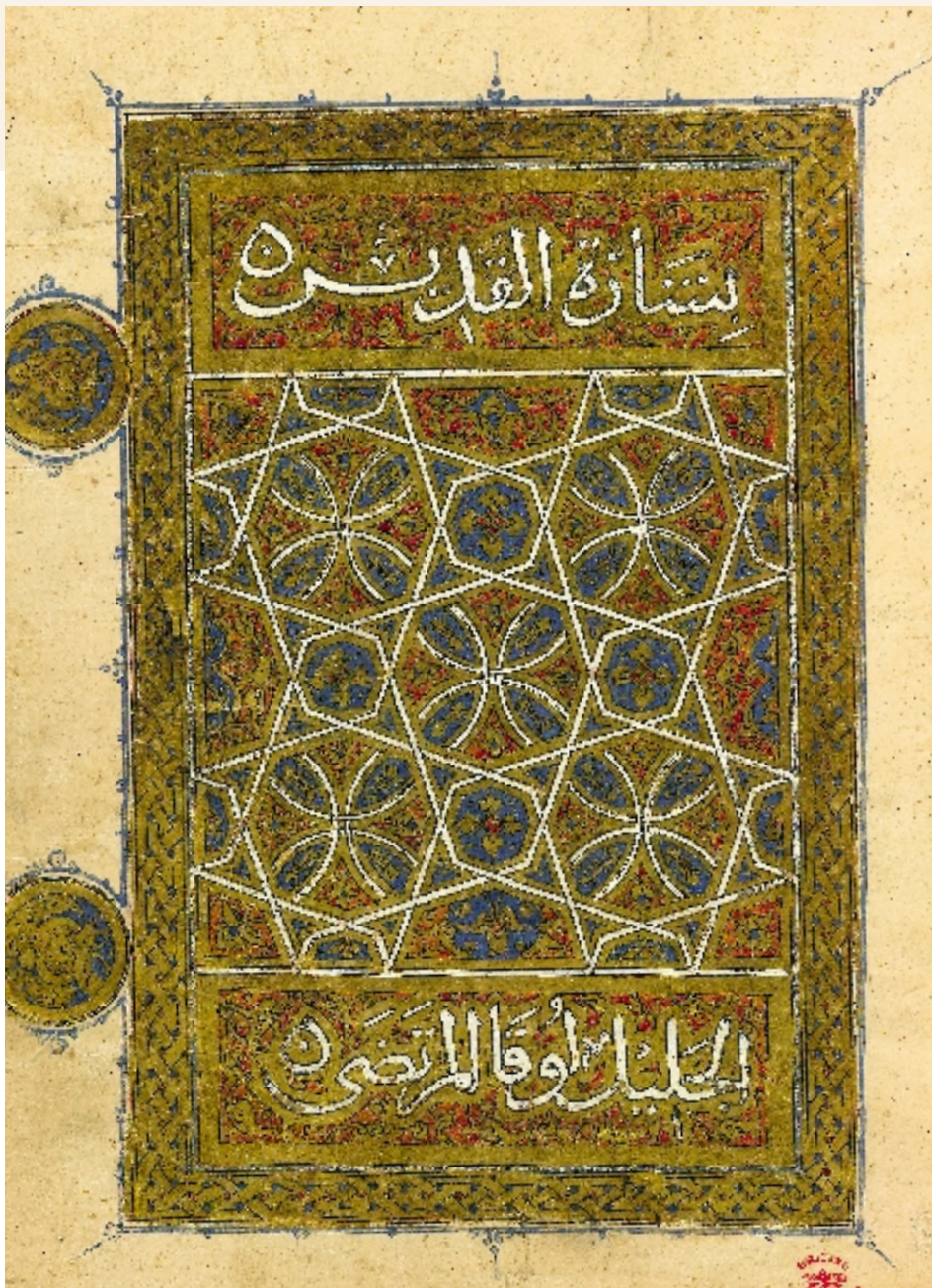


# Sacred:

## The British Library's Visual Feast Of Holy Texts

> London-Karen Dabrowska

Twenty magnificently illustrated Qur'ans are on display at the British Library's Sacred: Discover What We Share Exhibition which focuses on Islamic, Christian and Jewish holy books. It is open until the 23rd of September.

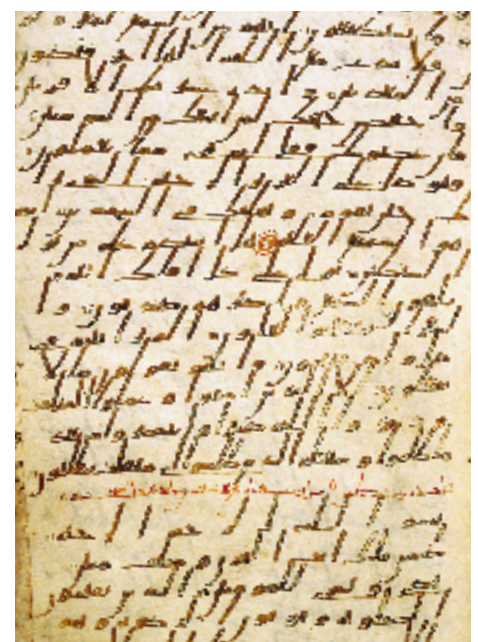


Gospel in Arabic (16th Century)

الاخيل بالعربية/ق.16م

Rare and exquisite examples from the library's collections - considered to be one of the greatest in the world - are presented alongside treasures on loan from other institutions. These include three Qur'ans from Morocco's Royal Library in Marrakech and a facsimile of Uthman's Quran from the Tashkent Islamic University which is being shown outside Uzbekistan for the first time.

The King of Morocco, one of the exhibition's patrons, insisted the texts were put on public display when Sacred was first planned



Ma'il Koran (Arabian Peninsula, 8th Century)

مصحف بالخط المائل (الجزيرة العربية. ق. 8م)

four year's ago. Donors from all three faiths namely the Coexist Foundation, the Moroccan British Society and the Saint Catherine Foundation funded the exhibition.

The British Library's Chief Executive, Lynne Brindley, said: "We present this exhibition as a contribution to the greater understanding of these three faiths, their historical roots, and their significance in the world today. As one of the world's great libraries, we invite everyone - of faith or no faith - to come, to think, to debate and to learn. It is also an opportunity to marvel at the beauty of the texts and to gain greater understanding of their contemporary relevance."

Sacred sees priceless examples of the Torah, New Testament and Qur'an mounted

alongside each other – not individually in separate zones. The 230 texts on display are treated thematically, exploring points in common, looking at the ways in which they have been produced, interpreted and used.

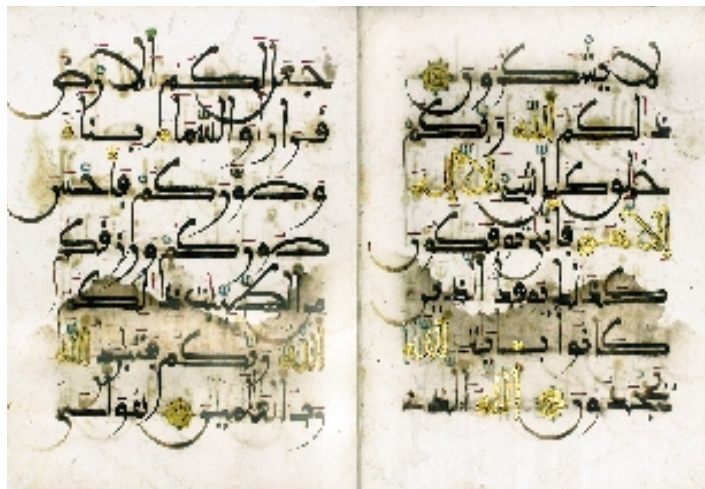
The Islamic manuscripts and treasures on display include:

1 - Ma'il Qur'an: One of the earliest Qur'ans in the world to have survived, dating from the beginning of the 8th century AD. That equates to the 1st century in the Muslim Hegri calendar. It was produced on the Arabian Peninsula, probably in or near the holy cities of Islam.

2 - Carpet page from a Qur'an, from 14th Century, Morocco. The design of this magnificent carpet page and the style of its

illumination are typical of decorative frontispieces produced in North Africa and Andalusian Spain. Gold, red, blue and green are the colours most often used in the decoration of manuscripts from this region. The most prominent feature of this carpet page is the geometric frame formed by the interlocking squares and octagons highlighted in white ink and filled in with arabesques.

3 - Uljaytu Qur'an: This royal deluxe manuscript of the Qur'an was made for the early 14th Century Mongol ruler of Iran, Uljaytu, a direct descendant of Ghenghis Khan. It was copied in 30 separate parts. On display is part 25, one of very few complete 'one-thirtieths' of this particular manuscript to have survived. ▶



Koran from the Royal Library in Morocco مصحف من المكتبة الملكية/المغرب



Sultan Uljaytu Koran (Iran 14th C) مصحف السلطان أوجايوتو (إيران ق. 14 م)



9th Century Kufik Koran مصحف بالخط الكوفي/ق. 9 م

Uljaytu converted to Christianity, Buddhism and finally Islam.

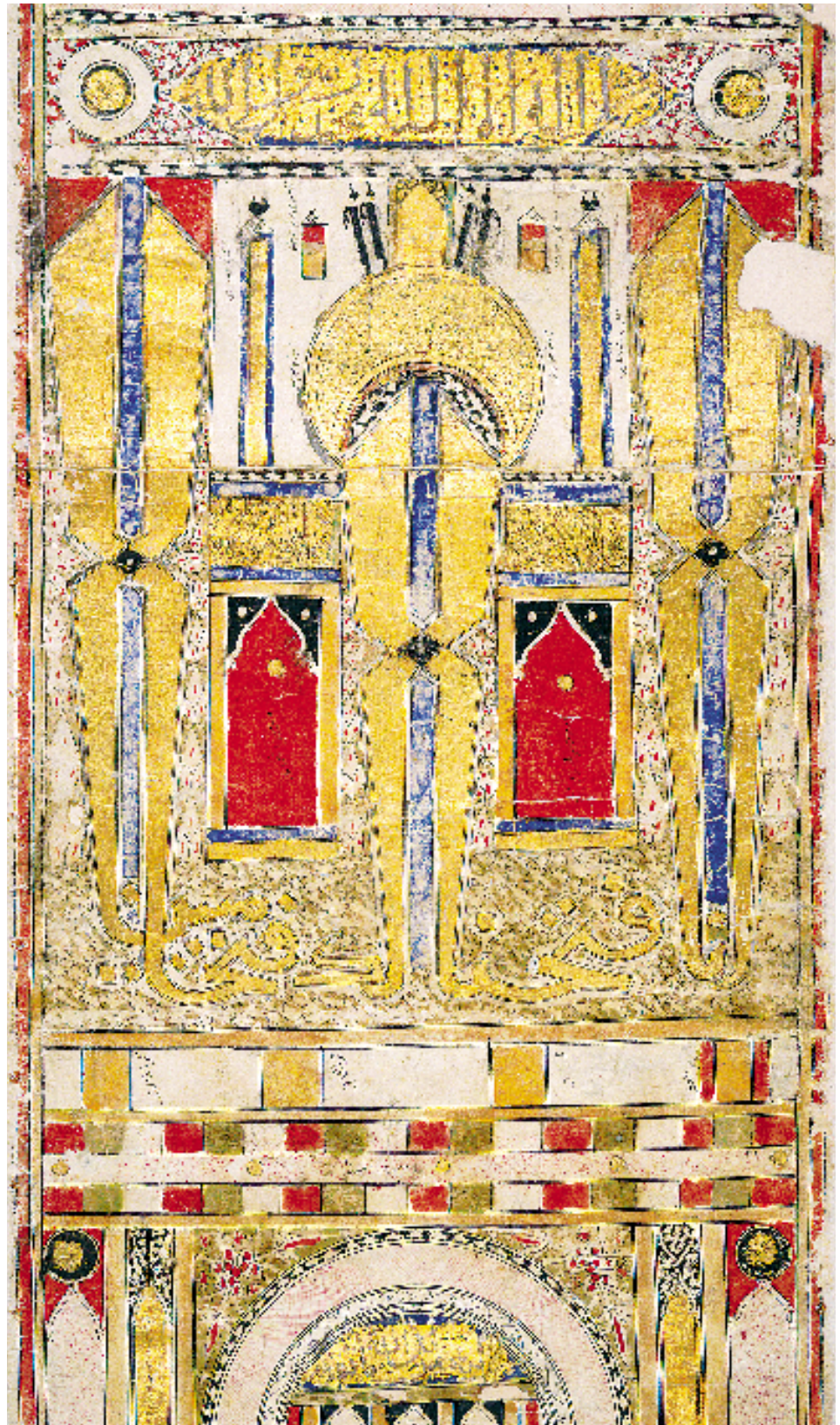
4 - Sultan Baybars' Qur'an is one of the finest of all Qur'an manuscripts, written in large letters of gold in seven magnificent folio volumes. It took three years (1304-06) to produce. Apart from the wonderfully bold calligraphy, each volume is provided with a magnificent double frontispiece, showing the intricacy of Islamic geometric patterns at its finest.

5 - The cover of Al-Ka'bah in Mecca. A new covering called a 'kiswah' is made for the Ka'bah every year during the month of pilgrimage, and the old covering is cut up and the pieces kept as relics.

The curtain covering the door into the Ka'bah is considered one of the most precious of these relics. The beautiful example on display is ornamented with Qur'anic inscriptions. It was made for the Ottoman Sultan Abdulmajid I in 1858.

The influence of the three religions on one another is clearly illustrated in the Book of Psalms in Arabic, a beautifully illuminated manuscript of the book prepared for the Coptic Christian community in Egypt dating from the early 16th century. At first glance the traditional "carpet-page" with purely Islamic geometric designs leads one to imagine it to be another Mamluk-period Qur'an - the portrait of King David comes as a surprise. This is a Christian manuscript but heavily influenced in its decoration, script, and layout by the manuscripts of the dominant religion of the area, Islam.

British Library curator and Arabic manuscripts expert Colin Baker emphasized that the exhibition was aimed at the general public. "It is an exhibition anyone can go to regardless of their knowledge of religion". He added that "People associate Islam with the Middle East but the Qur'an has been copied by Muslim communities in South East Asia. In Malaysia there are vibrant decorations, in China brush strokes are evident". ■



Hajj Certificate (Dated 836 Hijra/1432. Issued for a lady named Maymunah)

شهادة الحج (مؤرخة 836 هـ/1432 م. ومكتوبة لامرأة اسمها ميمونة)