

Britain embraced Islamic culture before immigrants arrived

London- Manal Ameer

The flow of Muslim immigrants to Britain started in the late 19th century when a number of Muslim sailors took up residence in port cities. However it was not until the middle of the 20th century that Muslim immigrants, mostly from the British colonies of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh started settling in Britain in large numbers. But the British people did not have to wait for the arrival of the immigrants to be introduced to Islamic culture and heritage.



Stone –paste tile friez decorated in luster and lobatt blue Iran, Kharasan 13th-4th century

آيات قرآنية

Leighton House

In the early 19th century Lord Frederic Leighton (1830 – 1896) the English classical painter and sculptor acquired an extraordinary collection of Islamic treasures in his house which was later turned into a museum and opened to the public. Leighton House is a journey to the Orient, a historical tour that should not be missed.

All the rooms are designed to compliment each other. With the exception of one room on the ground floor they are decorated in Victorian colours. Leighton made the ground floor room a unique Islamic-Arab room with architecture and decorations to match. Here the spirit of the orient is revived. Arabesque embellishes the hall, the high domed ceiling is painted with bright colours and some Quranic verses are carved on the edges that have an Ottoman touch. The walls are

covered with marble from the Arabian west. It is a room of peace where the soul is comforted and healed from fear. The fountain in the centre enhances the beauty and the soothing atmosphere is enhanced by the inscription on one of the walls: "enter ye here in peace and security" (Sura Hijr, 15.46) On the second floor of this unique house, is a wooden window that overlooks the Arabian hall. It resembles the windows of Old Egypt still found in the Arabian Peninsula and Syria.

The Islamic Gallery at the British Museum

The British Museum has an Islamic gallery which shows how Muslim artefacts were influenced by pre-Islamic civilizations. Visitors are greeted with a stone-paste tile frieze that clads the wall, decorated in luster

and blue. This stone, with some inscribed Qu'ranic verses, dates back to 13th -14th century Iran.

Many facets of Islamic civilisation are unveiled in the unique gallery. The tombstone of Mohamed Ibin Fatiq (d 967A. D.) is inscribed with Sura Alrahman : "all that is on earth will perish". Also on display are compasses that show the direction of prayer, royal jewels, pots, books, coins and countless collections from India to Morocco. Both contemporary and ancient paintings decorate the walls of the gallery which has an impressive collection of artefacts from dynasties that ruled the Islamic world during the past 14 centuries of Islamic history: The Andalusian, Persian, Mogul, Ottoman etc No one is quite sure how this collection was acquired by the British Museum but taking into account Britain's long colonisation of ➤



Tin glaze pottery 9th-10th century, Iraq.

أواني وقوارير عطر عراقية من القرنين التاسع والعاشر الميلاديين

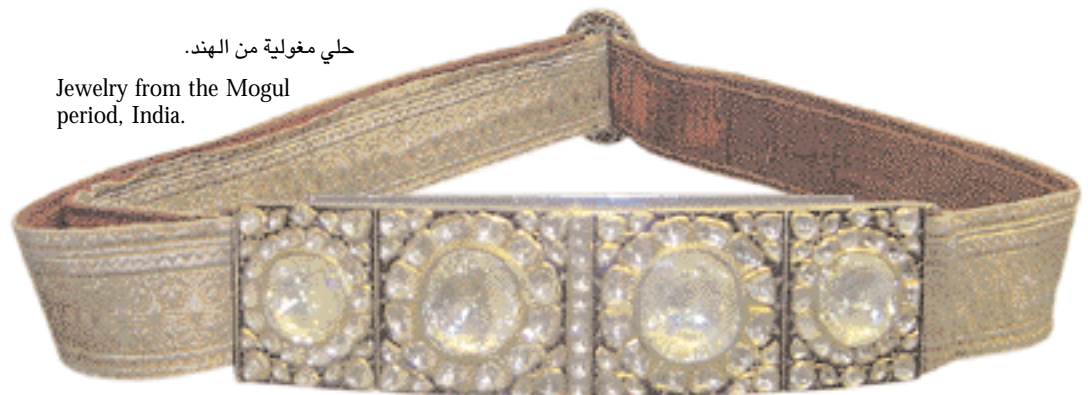
the Islamic world some of the items are probably looted treasures.

Each show room is special and has a different mood and spirit. The most attractive is the display of the luxuries

jewellery of the Mogul emperors, daggers and swords made of gold and precious stones. A velvet tapestry from the 12th

Somerset House

In Somerset House on the Strand, the Khan family trust has joined forces with the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg stage a magnificent exhibition of private and public collections named Heaven on Earth on display until the end of September. The collections cover the Muslim world there are pieces even from the holiest holy places: Mecca, a segment from the Kaaba cover adorns one of the walls. In the first show room, there is a collection of Qurans, dating from the 15th to the 19th century from North Africa, Iran, and Middle Eastern countries.



حلي مغولية من الهند.

Jewelry from the Mogul period, India.



An old manuscript

مخطوطة قديمة.

Laila" (The mad lover of Laila).

A row of magnificent, expensive paintings adorns the corridor that connects the show rooms. They include a page from the Gulshen -ishq "the rose - garden of love" by the Sufi poet Nasrati, (Hyderabad, India). There is a poem that narrates the story of a Mogul emperor, King Bikran and his wife when their son was born. The drawing sheds light on the role of Muslim saints and scholars in enriching Urdu literature with eloquence and wisdom. It also illustrates how Islam itself ennobled remote nations with its ethics.

Another expressive painting is a miniature of the giant Uj and the prophets Moses, Jesus and Muhammad (peace be upon them) symbolic of coexistence between these three religions.

Victoria and Albert Museum

When writing about Islamic culture and heritage in Britain, one cannot forget the Victoria and Albert Museum – the world's largest art and design museum. The Islamic Gallery is filled with antiquities from different periods and countries. At present the gallery is closed and will not re-open until 2006.

However the Islamic collection of the V&A is not limited to this gallery. The ceramic gallery exhibits works from different Middle Eastern

countries: looted tombstones from shrines, tiles for decorative purposes, pottery and even spandrel from a prayer niche (mihrab). The glass gallery has a small collection that was also looted from holy places and includes mosque lamps.

Although British museums are rich with Islamic antiquities, Islam's heritage has never been limited to museum halls. It influenced British art, inspired architects and changed beliefs with its peaceful message. Today Islam is the second largest religion in the United Kingdom, with more than 2 million followers (3.1 per cent of the population). Islamic centres and mosques are everywhere, and specialized educational institutions (such as London University's School of Oriental and African Studies) teach Arabic, Islamic and oriental studies.

London's Islamic community is enriched by a mixture of people from different backgrounds and ethnic origins; Asian, African, Arab, Caribbean and European who have integrated into the public life of the host society. A global awareness of Islam has ensured that Islamic culture is now part of Britain's multi-faceted culture. ■



Pots belonging to the sixteenth century.

أوان تعود إلى القرن السادس عشر.



Body Armors.

درع للصدر وآخر للذراع.