

MUSEUMS *Continental Europe*

Histoires islamiques

Under a golden canopy, the Louvre offers a French view of the art of the Middle East (and thereabouts)

FRANCE

Paris. The Louvre's dramatic new Islamic galleries opened on 22 September, just as we went to press. How they compare with other Islamic art departments at leading museums in Berlin, London and New York will be a point of debate among specialists in the field.

Sophie Makariou, the director of the Louvre's Islamic art department, says: "The narrative differs from that told by other museums in that we present and consider things in a very French way, that is deeply sensitive to the mainframe of history." The Louvre's director describes the motivation behind the project in similarly candid terms. Henri Loyrette told *Apollo* magazine: "[The new wing] is also a political gesture because in these times it is important to show the luminous side of Islam, to show how, since the seventh century, there have been links between the West and this aspect of the faith."

The 3,000 sq. m suite of galleries, covered by a rippling glass roof, is built across two levels in the Louvre's Visconti courtyard. The galleries aim to tell the story of the Islamic world and its development on three continents from the beginning of the eighth century until the end of the 18th century.

First among equals

Last year, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York opened its galleries for the Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and Later South Asia. Costing \$40m, they measure 1,800 sq. m. The range and quantity of artefacts all under one roof set a precedent for future presentations of Islamic art.

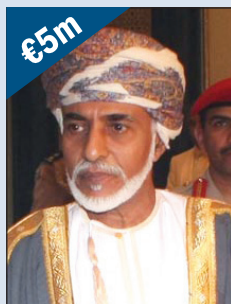
Sheila Canby, the head of Islamic art at the Met, argued that for the museum's peers to do justice to 13 centuries of achievement, major reorganisations of collections elsewhere would be needed (*The Art Newspaper*, October 2011, p106). In Paris, for instance, the holdings of the Louvre and the Musée Guimet would need to be combined.

"It is a matter more of semantics and spin... the Met usually claims to have the largest/most comprehensive [collection], meaning there may be larger or there may be more comprehensive collections elsewhere but not the two together," says an Islamic art curator who wishes to remain anonymous. "The Louvre clearly has a great collection, which is absolutely the equal overall of the Met's collection."

Louvre's royal donors: who gave what



Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, King Mohammed VI of Morocco, the Emir of Kuwait and the Sultan of Oman



Tim Stanley, the senior curator in the Asian department (Middle East) at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, says that the Louvre can justifiably claim to have the outstanding galleries of Islamic art outside the Islamic world. "The factors are the ambition and design qualities of the new galleries... the quality of the collection, which is the product of a recent merger—the addition of more than 3,000 items from the excellent collection of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs to the already impressive [15,000-strong] holdings of the Louvre—and the intelligence and thoroughness of the curating."

Attention has focused on the golden mesh roof across the Visconti courtyard, designed by the architects Rudy Ricciotti and Mario Bellini, but spectacle is also found in illuminating displays inside,

including a wall frieze assembled from disparate sets of Ottoman tiles and a 15th-century Mamluk porch installed in an alcove off the lower gallery.

Soft power

The decision to redesign the surrounding spaces dedicated to the East Mediterranean in the Roman Empire also reflects the curatorial rigour, further contextualising the Islamic art with ancient works from Roman and Coptic Egypt, as well as Syria and Palestine.

The Louvre's ambitious plan has found favour with the Islamic world, prompting donations from governments in the Middle East and North Africa. The €98.5m project received state funding of €31m, as well as €17m from the Alwaleed Bin Talal Foundation, established by the eponymous Saudi

prince. The republic of Azerbaijan, the Emir of Kuwait, the Sultan of Oman and King Mohammed VI of Morocco have donated in total €26m.

Backing the Louvre's Islamic wing is a form of "soft power" in action—where better to enforce cultural diplomacy than at the world's most popular museum (8.9m visitors in 2011)? "These donors understand... how critically important it is to encourage a more accurate and sensitive appreciation of the subtlety and range of Islamic art, as the Louvre's new exhibits will," says Barry Lord of Lord Cultural Resources, the culture consultancy, which advised the museum on the "functional programme" for its new Islamic galleries.

Hossein Amirsadeghi, the editor of *Art and Patronage: The Middle East*, says that the Louvre has gained royal sponsors in the Middle East thanks to a conservative approach. "It's innocuous culture—Islamic—rather than challenging art such as contemporary or Modern," he says. "Every ruler since the convention (invention) of Islam

The galleries reinforce the Louvre brand in the Gulf

has put his mark, or stamp, on earthly tyranny or heavenly reward by dialling up Allah for social and political sanction in the guise of visible architecture, or artefacts, as connecting points in history," he adds.

The galleries reinforce the Louvre brand in the Gulf before the launch of the Louvre Abu Dhabi in 2015. The cultural benefits of this partnership, like the Islamic galleries, are clear, with the Louvre receiving €400m over 30 years from the United Arab Emirates authorities for the use of its name. *Gareth Harris*



A flying carpet of glass and steel

In brief

Great expectations for Louvre Abu Dhabi

Paris. The Louvre Abu Dhabi announced at the end of September

that it is organising "Birth of a Museum", an exhibition that will include recent acquisitions for the museum planned for

Saadiyat Island. They form an eclectic selection, ranging from antiquities to historic photographs, as well as Gauguin's *Breton Boys Wrestling*, 1888 (above, detail). The exhibition is due to open in Abu Dhabi in spring 2013 and a version will be shown in the Louvre, Paris. *J.P.*



Cut the red tape, say Rome's museum heads

Rome. The directors of Rome's state funded museums are struggling with budget cuts and the dead hand of bureaucracy. The Galleria Borghese had to cancel a Candida Höfer show in June and a second unnamed show in September, although both had sponsors. The ministry was blamed for being late to give the go-ahead for the exhibitions. Meanwhile, at MaXXi, the minister of culture, who has been in charge of Rome's museum of modern art and architecture since April, is handing over to two new directors. MaXXi's next show, on Le Corbusier (18 October-17 February 2013), is sponsored by the French and Swiss embassies in Rome, Pro Helvetica (the Swiss arts council) and the Le Corbusier Foundation. *G.D.A.*

Rijksmuseum to reopen in spring 2013

Amsterdam. The Rijksmuseum will reopen in April 2013 after a decade-long refurbishment project. The €375m modernisation has taken five years longer than originally planned. Wim Pijbes, who became the director in 2008, says that the brief for the project team had to change "because the world has changed and museums have changed", citing the importance of contemporary art "events", such as "Monumenta" in Paris and Tate Modern's Turbine Hall commissions in London. The Philips Wing, which during the main building's closure has been home to paintings and artefacts from the Dutch Golden Age, will eventually become a temporary exhibition space. Meanwhile, Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum has acquired a portrait of Osama Bin Laden by Marlene Dumas. It was due to go on show when the modern and contemporary art museum unveiled its long-delayed extension at the end of September. *J.P.*



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- 10/11/12
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