

MUSEUMS *International*

Saudi Arabian culture centre secures loans from Los Angeles to London

King Abdulaziz Center hopes to increase international partnerships and be "an engine for soft power"

MIDDLE EAST

Dhahran. Saudi Arabia is looking to strengthen its cultural ties with institutions in the West, symbolised by the construction of a prestigious cultural centre by the state-owned oil company, Saudi Aramco. International partners include London's British Museum and Natural History Museum, the Centre Pompidou in Paris and now the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Lacma).

Last month Lacma announced it will loan more than 130 items from its Islamic art collection for an inaugural exhibition at the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture under construction in the eastern city of Dhahran. Originally scheduled to open in 2013, the centre is now due to be unveiled early next year.

The vast complex is being built by Saudi Aramco and will be near its oil museum as well as the Prosperity Well, a national landmark that commemorates the site where oil was first discovered in the kingdom in commercial quantities. The new centre, designed by the Norwegian architects Snøhetta, is costing \$400m to build, according to Walter P. Moore, the Texas-based structural engineering company that advised on the construction.

The new complex will include an underground library and archives, a performing arts space on the ground floor and a "Knowledge Tower". The centre will host touring exhibitions and house a museum that will have four main galleries. "The museum will mount national and international exhibits to explore Saudi Arabia's burgeoning contemporary art scene, its rich natural and social history and the still hidden secrets of the Arabian Peninsula's ancient civilisation," says a museum statement.

The complex is being built by Saudi Aramco

One gallery, "Funoon (Expressions)", will be devoted to contemporary art from the Middle East while another space, "Ajyaal (Generations)", will show exhibits that "explore Saudi identity – past, present and future". The new complex will also include the country's first public cinema and theatre.

The international museum consultant Gail Dexter Lord said in a speech last December that the centre "will be one of the few places that men and women can visit together, apart from shopping malls. In the sense that this cultural centre promotes an agenda of opening

up society, it is an engine of soft power."

A source close to the project says that the King Abdulaziz Center does not plan to build its own collection and is "keen to appeal to younger audiences".

The Lacma exhibition is due to run for two years. The centrepiece of the show is the 18th-century Damascus Room, incorporating an inlaid stone wall fountain, which was acquired by Lacma last year. The room, restored with funding from the King Abdulaziz Center, will be shown in public for the first time in Saudi Arabia. "The contact with the King Abdulaziz Center was initially on a curatorial level," says Linda Komaroff, the head of Lacma's Middle East department.

Asked whether Lacma would receive loan fees for the works, a museum spokeswoman says: "The contract is the same as any Lacma permanent collection travelling exhibition. The borrower pays all costs for shipping and they pay an exhibition fee, not a loan fee. We are creating the exhibition for them, providing the catalogue, labels, didactics, video for the Damascus room, etc. They are not being treated any differently from other institutions except for the length of the exhibition."

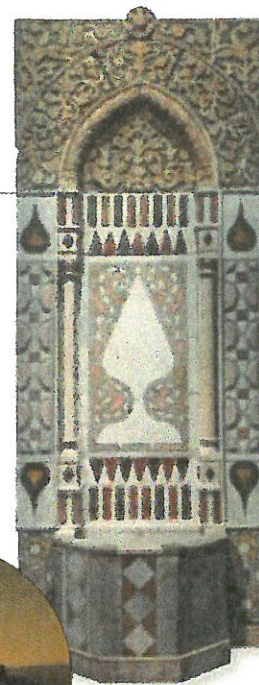
"Contrary to what some may think, it is not all about money. The reason we

want the Islamic collection to travel is for our collection to be better known internationally and to be able to share it with communities that do not otherwise have access to this type of art," Komaroff says.

There are plans to include in the exhibition a small section on the impact of Islamic art in Europe to reflect its "internationalism". This may include Ottoman-style textiles from Italy, and a pair of Mamluk-inspired Brocard vases.

The centre is also collaborating with the Natural History Museum in London, which is assisting with the "Rihlaat (Journeys)" section of the museum, where visitors will see an excavation of the desert beneath the building. And the British Museum has appointed a project curator to develop two temporary exhibitions to mark the opening next year. "The museum will support the centre on the opening exhibitions in its Funoon (Expressions) and Ajyaal (Generations) galleries, on the themes of calligraphy and Saudi Arabian culture and heritage," says a British

Lacma is lending its recently acquired Damascus Room (detail, right) for two years to the new cultural centre (below)



Museum spokeswoman.

Meanwhile, a spokesman for the Centre Pompidou says that the Beaubourg gallery has "informal" links with the King Abdulaziz Center, providing some "unofficial training" in Paris. In 2013, loans from the Pompidou of works by Pablo Picasso, Alexander Calder and Yves Klein were included in an exhibition organised by Saudi Aramco in Dhahran.

But as cultural partnerships with Saudi Arabia increase, Western institutions could face increasing calls to speak out about the state of human rights in the conservative kingdom. As we went to press, the blogger Raif Badawi had received the first of 1,000 lashes, part of his punishment for running a website devoted to freedom of speech.
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