

London's British Museum announced this August that a new exhibition entitled Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam will open at the museum in January 2012, bringing together historic and contemporary objects – including contemporary art, video, pilgrims' testimonies, manuscripts, textiles, archaeological items and photography – to explore the experience and importance of the annual pilgrimage. Visitors to the exhibition can also expect sound-cones emitting the *labbaik* prayer, extracts from The Autobiography of Malcolm X (he went on Hajj in 1964), the *Kiswah* (the cloth covering the Kaaba) and the bottle that explorer Richard Burton filled with water from the Zamzam well in 1853. The show is scheduled to run from January 26 - April 15, 2012. Venetia Porter, responsible for the British Museum's collection of Islamic and modern Middle Eastern art and also chief curator for the exhibition, spoke to the Herald on how this exhibition will focus on the history of Islam and the region, while looking at the material culture surrounding the religion.



Courtesy The British Museum

The Kaaba in Mecca shown as the centre of the world, in an illustration from *Tarih-i Hind-i Garbi*, 1650

By Sanam Maher

“We are examining the relationship **between faith and society**”

Q. Why has the British Museum chosen to stage an exhibition of this scale on this particular subject?

A. This exhibition came about as Neil MacGregor, the director of the British Museum, thought it would be a good idea to do a series on spiritual journeys. We've been working on this exhibition for two years. We began looking at different subjects and realised the subject of Hajj had not been extensively covered before. This was a subject of personal interest for me as well — I was born and brought up in Lebanon and studied Arabic and Islamic art. I knew what Hajj was. However, it was only when I started to do preliminary research that I realised I knew practically nothing about it — it was extraordinary to me. The sense of the journey and the notion of people coming together at one time in the year, travelling extraordinary distances, saving for years in order to make the journey — I found this astounding. You read accounts of people who died on Hajj or journeys that took up to two years and feel

a great respect for those who were doing this. Even when you hear modern accounts of the journey or speak with pilgrims today, such as my fellow curator Qaisra Khan, you understand that the journey is still incredibly arduous, and despite changes over the years, it is something people want to do as a renewal of faith. I find it very powerful that the rituals have remained unchanged over the years and the process allows hajjis to feel connected to their past.

Q. How do you hope to convey the spiritual and inherently physical nature of the journey?

A. The exhibition has been organised in three main sections — the preparation for Hajj and the journey, reaching the heart of Islam and, finally, what it means to be a hajji. With an exhibition as extensive as this, you do not need more than 180 objects, but each one must tell a story — it must serve as a springboard for the visitor, taking him or her in a particular direction. The exhibits must work as a jigsaw, the pieces coming together in order to tell a story, and you must choose the stories you want to focus on. I realised that there were thousands of stories of journeys — how do you represent them and, more importantly, which ones do you represent? We have divided the journeys into four main stories, focused on geographical hubs — the journeys to Mecca from Egypt, Africa, Syria, Iraq and so on. The challenge is to narrow down these stories and find voices that will engage the public. Conveying the spiritual aspect of the journey has been one of the most exciting parts of this exhibition and we're in touch with Muslim communities in order to capture the experiences of hajjis. Pilgrims can send us their stories through the British Museum website and so on. It is a challenge to convey the spiritual nature of this event and that's what we're really working on right now. When you come in to the exhibit, you'll find text on the walls, verses from the Quran, the words of those who have experienced Hajj, multi-media guides that allow you to hear peoples' experiences and sound-cones that convey the auditory experience of being present in that space.

Q. Can you talk about the process of gathering material for exhibition?

A. We have borrowed material from the British Museum's own India Archives, the Imperial War Museum, the Royal Geographic Society and so on. We've received material from the Bibliotheque Nationale de France, manuscripts from Timbuktu and the Khalili private archive of Islamic art has generously loaned us material. The Saudis have been guiding us in terms of the organisation of modern Hajj — details about how three million hajjis are accommodated annually, for example. I've been travelling to Saudi Arabia for two years in order to access collections and working out agreements for loans. Some items, such as the key to the Kaaba, will also be displayed in the exhibit. We're working with roughly 35 lenders. In terms of modern material, people will soon be asked to send us their images via our website. The exhibition will also include the work of Saudi artists Ahmed Mater and Shadia Alem (who represented Saudi Arabia at the Venice Biennale earlier this year), the Moroccan-French artist Kader Attia and Iraqi artist Walid Siti.

Q. The British Museum's Facebook page has received comments from users who say this is a "placatory exhibition" — how do you take into account such comments? And how do you cater to Muslim and non-Muslim visitors while also considering a generation that has grown up in a diaspora, not identifying with their Muslim



Painting from a copy of the *Anis ul-Hujaj*, a guide to pilgrimage, circa 1677-80

roots as their parents may have?

A. We're dealing with two kinds of publics here. A non-Muslim public knows that Hajj exists, but knows very little about it. We conducted numerous focus groups in order to find out what people already know and what they are interested in finding out about. Non-Muslims often do not distinguish between the monotheistic religions — for example, they may not know that Abraham was a central figure in all three monotheistic religions. It is very important in our world to understand the importance of this religious experience, to understand Islam. This has actually been one of the interesting aspects of this exhibition — to create something that someone who knows nothing or very little about Islam can see and appreciate. The British Museum is secular — we are striking a balance between the historical and religious perspective, examining the relationship between faith and society. I don't think we are trying to force people to visit a religious exhibition — the Hajj exhibition is a way of looking at Islam through the material culture surrounding the



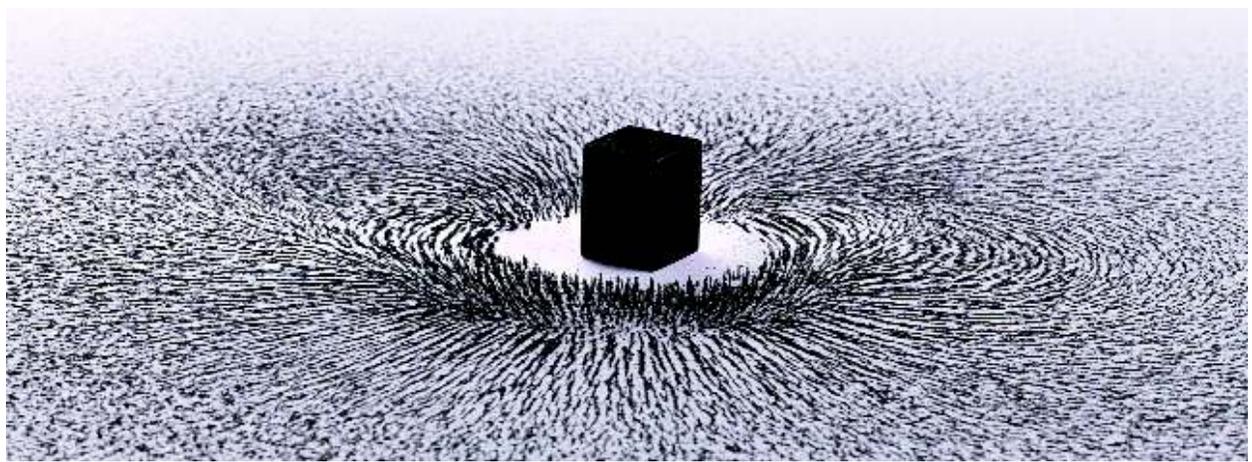
A 19th century water bottle made of Chinese porcelain containing Zamzam water

religion. We focus on the incredibly interesting history of the religion and the region — for example, we take a look at the British colonial period, when companies such as Thomas Cook arranged travel, or when the Dutch controlled the travel routes in Southeast Asia. What we're doing is opening a window into the first year of Islam – the beginning of the seventh century – using Hajj as a prism through which to view these moments in time. As for those who say it is a “placatory” exhibition — I would ask them to give us the benefit of the doubt.

As for Muslims, we're obviously dealing with different generations. We want them to feel we've got it right — we want them to recognise facets of themselves in the exhibition. We're working with a range of Muslim scholars and advisory groups, including Hajj organisations. Qaisra Khan has been in touch with different community groups and people have been so enthusiastic to give us advice and relate their experiences that it's been very heartening, especially when you've got such a steep learning curve. It reinforces what we're trying to do.



Top: Magnetism by Ahmed Mater Al Ziad ; bottom: Venetia Porter, curator of the Hajj exhibition



Q. You have not travelled to Mecca or Medina or undertaken Hajj. How do you think this has affected your role as curator of an exhibition that is steeped in the experience of the event and history of the space?

A. Of course, I'm so curious about the experience and I would love to travel to Mecca, but that is not possible. I'm fortunate to work with Qaisra, who is a hajji, and gives me a sense of the experience. While this is a strange experience for me, I'd like to think that it is helpful having a distance as a curator — as an art historian, I can deconstruct the objects in a different way, without that sense of personal connection to them. We have a team of 10 or 12 people working directly on this exhibition and others peripherally – on the website, for example – and several have never experienced Hajj. However, everyone has been captivated by the experience. We all recognise that we're doing something that hasn't been done before and conveying an atmosphere of this space in a way we have not done with any of our other exhibitions. An exhibition we did in 2007, *The First Emperor*, exhibited incredible world-famous objects; the

Hajj exhibition is different from our other exhibitions in that we're focusing on the atmospheric side. The beautiful objects are not all world-famous and we're spending a lot of time choosing old photographs and objects as well as modern stories that will really give you the sense of people from Malaysia to Pakistan to Bradford converging on this one place.

Q. The exhibition is bringing together objects from as far as Istanbul's Topkapi Palace Museum to collections in Timbuktu — what are some of your personal favourites to be exhibited?

A. I think some of the textiles we have borrowed are just incredible. There is also a Hajj certificate we borrowed from a woman who could not go on Hajj and sent a proxy instead. I think the depictions of the sanctuary at Mecca in manuscripts are beautiful. The guides to pilgrimage – they tell you where to do your *tawaf* or the location of the Muqaam-e-Ibrahim, for example – are so rich in colour. I love the modern art because the artists' responses to this experience and space are very interesting. I think I have a new favourite object every day.

Q. Do you have any favourites in the Pakistani art world?
A. I've been slowly learning about Pakistani artists; at the Sharjah Biennale, I had the chance to see Imran Qureshi's work and I loved it. I love the combination of these contemporary artists working in the karkhana tradition. I saw an intervention by Rashid Rana at the Musee Guimet in Paris and thought it was amazing. These Pakistani artists are hugely talented — I'm just at zero at the moment and am slowly discovering their work. ■