

# THE MIDDLE EAST IN LONDON

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### EVENTS IN LONDON



LONDON MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE





# The Arts of Islam: Treasures from the Nasser D Khalili collection

By Venetia Porter

THE Emirates Palace hotel in Abu Dhabi is the unusual venue for *The Arts of Islam*, a travelling exhibition comprising 500 objects from the Khalili collection. The visitor steps from the glitzy hotel lobby into a calm space, brilliantly transformed and designed by Colin Morris; in the background, softly recited verses from the Qur'an can be heard. A series of rooms focus on different themes, beginning with 'Art in the Service of Religion', appropriately the strongest section of the exhibition, and in which there is case after case of beautifully calligraphed and illuminated early Qur'ans and single folios. The *hajj* is wonderfully represented by certificates, manuscripts, paintings such as the pages from the delightful 17th century Anis al-Hujaj showing the faithful setting off on their journey to Mecca; views of the sanctuary at Mecca culminating in the remarkable 19th century panorama by the Delhi cartographer Muhammad 'Abdallah. The other sections of the exhibition concentrate on science, magic, pottery and metalwork associated with the great centres of art and patronage at different moments in time: Baghdad, Cairo, Damascus, Tabriz, Samarqand and elsewhere. Pages from the famous World History of Rashid al-Din (d. 1318), arguably the single most important object in the Khalili collection, line the walls in a section focusing on the Mongols entitled Phoenix Rising. The arts of the later dynasties – the Safavids, Qajars, Ottomans and Mughals – are the final section and represented by staggering jewels, carpets, ceramics and much else besides.

For those without the good fortune of being able to see this fabulous exhibition in Abu Dhabi, a sumptuous, extremely well

illustrated book accompanies the exhibition, written by Michael Rogers, honorary curator of the Khalili collection, with contributions by other scholars. Far more than a catalogue, it serves both as a useful insight into Islamic art and a welcome introduction to, and distillation of, the Khalili collection, which now numbers a phenomenal 20,000 objects. The exhibition is also important not only for the beauty of the objects but for what it symbolises. It is the first major venture of the dynamic and newly created Tourism Development and Investment Company (TDIC), which is masterminding the Sa'diyat island museums project. When I visited the Arts of Islam exhibition, it was packed with Emiratis and ex-pats attentively reading the labels and marvelling at the wonderful objects before them. This bodes well for the future plans of the TDIC, which is ambitious to transform the Emirates into a 'cultural hub' for the region.

*The Arts of Islam* was held at the Emirates Palace Hotel, Abu Dhabi from 23rd January to 22nd April. The accompanying book by J. M. Rogers is published by the Tourism Development and Investment Company, Abu Dhabi, 2008.

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Shakyamuni offering fruit to the Devil' from the Jami' al-Tawarikh (Compendium of Chronicles) of Rashid al-Din Iran, Tabriz, 1314 AD. Ink and watercolours, gold and silver on paper, 9.5 x 25.5 cm (painting) Image courtesy of the Nour Foundation, Khalili Family Trust

