



PHOTO: SAYEED AHMED

# A priceless gem in Copenhagen

How a private museum in Copenhagen is raising awareness on Islamic civilisation and its place in human history

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On a short trip to Copenhagen, my wife and I, having just visited the Little Mermaid and the Hans Christian Andersen museum, are wandering where to go next. Just then, by a sheer stroke of luck, someone at the tourist information centre casually mentions The David Collection, a museum that specialises in Islamic decorative art. We are instantly hooked. A short walk from the National Art Gallery, we reach a neo-classical building housing the Davids Samling, as it is called in Danish. We walk in, along with a group of school children.

There is no entry fee, a pleasant surprise. Upon a deposit of DKK 10, we get a tablet with a special button on the back, which if tapped against a similar one next to any display, activates the relevant description in English. We head straight to the Islamic Art section that occupies the top two floors. We step out of the lift, and are instantly transported into the realm of Islam: the mesmerising "Orient" with its fragrances, colours, mannerisms, wisdom, artisans, warriors, sages, polymaths, travellers, painters, courtyards, and arabesque designs. It's a panorama of Islamic civilisation across its length and breadth, from Spain to India also detailing its interactions with other civilisations.

Mind blowing. Rich. Dizzying.

The museum is organised in 20 sections—from The Prophet Mohammad to mid-19th-century India, covering almost every chapter of the Islamic world in between, including the Samanids, Il-Khanids and Golden Horde, Mamluks, Seljuks of Rum and Ottomans. Each is presented in its historical context, with



Miniature from an Arabic translation of Dioscorides De Materia Medica, Iraq, 1224.

texts, maps, art, coin, architecture, textiles, books and tools, supplemented by three special collections—miniature painting, calligraphy, and textiles. A resource area presents a number of subjects outside their chronological and geographical contexts: 14 cultural history themes; the phenomenon of revivals, forgeries and restoration; and artistic techniques. The cultural history themes include varied subjects, such as: Symbolism in Islamic Art; Trade, Measures and Weights; Mechanics, Astronomy and Astrology; Medical Science; and Art of War.

The sheer number of exhibits is worth

noting, way too large to be accommodated in the two floors allocated to the collection. Many items are on display with glass covers, many more are inside drawers for the visitor to pull out and view. It is not possible to describe the whole museum in this short piece and I will only try to give an overview, along with some relevant historical facts.

This stunning collection starts with the origins of Islam at Mecca. We are then led to parchment leaves of the handwritten Quran in different calligraphic styles—Hijazi from the second half of 7th century, Kufi from circa 900 North Africa, Maghribi from 14th century Spain or Morocco and so on. The Hijazi Quran, written down shortly after the Prophet's death, is one of the oldest that has been preserved. Calligraphy adorned with miniature paintings were at the core of Islamic art since the beginning. Later, miniature paintings became independent works of art.

One such miniature work on display is the Arabic translation of Dioscorides De Materia Medica from 13th century Baghdad. Arab pharmacology borrowed significantly from the Greeks and this book is a testament to the importance it gained in the Islamic world. It is a product of the House of Wisdom, a grand library in Baghdad, founded in the 8th century, which undertook large scale translation of Greek and Syriac works to Arabic. Such translation movements led to some of the seminal breakthroughs in science, astronomy and medicine.



Astrolabe, brass, engraved and inlaid with silver. PHOTOS: WWW.DAVIDMUS.DK

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