

Exhibition Review

The Art of the Qur'an: Treasures from the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts

Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Washington D.C.

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In October 2016 the Smithsonian's Freer and Sackler Galleries unveiled the groundbreaking exhibition *The Art of the Qur'an: Treasures from the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts*. As the first display of Qur'ans from the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts in the United States, this landmark exhibition was effective in introducing the art of the Holy Book of Islam to a wide audience. The exhibition featured more than sixty Qur'ans from Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan, and the Arab world, showcasing the breadth of Qur'an production and the stylistic variances that existed across the Islamic world.¹ Through the display of an array of Qur'ans embodying various levels of artistry, this exhibition was successful in bringing Islam's Holy Book to life.²

Comprised of two floors, *The Art of the Qur'an* took visitors on a journey into the world of the Qur'an. Curators Massumeh Farhad and Simon Rettig carefully crafted the installation space, utilizing light to convey the sensory experience of interacting with the Qur'an.³ Upon entering the exhibition, viewers passed a recording of a male voice intoning *Sura al-Fatiha*, the opening verse of the Qur'an, which added an aural element to the visual parts of the exhibition and demonstrated how the Qur'an is recited. Visitors then met a large Qur'an from Safavid Iran encased in glass, with elegant *naskhi* calligraphy alternating in black and gold ink. Copied by Khan Ahmad Sayri in 1599, this Qur'an displays characteristics conventional of Safavid illumination, such as the use of gold and blue and the intricate medallions containing intertwining floral motifs. This manuscript demonstrated to the visitors the magnitude of some Qur'ans. Manuscripts were displayed on purple-colored walls, with individual manuscript folios hung in frames or exhibited in glass cases reserved for the more complete volumes. The rooms were dim, and the low lighting above each manuscript highlighted the illuminated pages and made the sparkling ink glow. The corresponding wall texts throughout the exhibition mostly referred to the religious themes of the Qur'an, although some discussed the patronage and creative processes behind illuminated Qur'ans.

¹ See the exhibition catalogue for more information: Massumeh Farhad and Simon Rettig, eds. *The Art of the Qur'an: Treasures from the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts*. Washington, DC: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 2016.

² In 610 CE, the Prophet Muhammad began receiving prophecies by God communicated through the Archangel Gabriel. These verses formed the text of the Qur'an and were initially transmitted orally before they were written down. Illuminated Qur'ans emerged as a crucial aspect of royal patronage under the Umayyad caliphate (661-750 CE) and continued to flourish throughout the Islamic world. Qur'ans produced before the eleventh century were made of parchment and written in *kufic* script, characterized by angular letters. *Kufic* was replaced with an elongated script called *naskhi* in the eleventh century, during which Qur'ans were produced on paper. Ink was used to write the Qur'an and was frequently embellished with gold leaf and blue ink, derived from lapis lazuli.

³ Recommended listening: *The Art of the Qur'an Closer Looks: Four Conversations*, <http://www.asia.si.edu/exhibitions/current/art-of-the-quran/video.php>, October 17, 2016.

As visitors continued through the exhibition, they encountered Qur'ans manufactured in different contexts, ranging from Fatimid Egypt (909-1171) to the Ottoman Empire (1281-1924). Due to the broad geographical variety of these manuscripts, additional wall text explaining how Qur'ans were made within each society would have been effective in conveying the nuances of book production in the Islamic world. The exhibition featured two pages from a particularly noteworthy and monumental Qur'an produced for Timur, the founder of the Timurid dynasty, which encompassed Iran and Transoxiana from 1370-1507. Produced around 1400, these pages embody the grandeur associated with Qur'an patronage due to their large size and impeccable calligraphy. While Qur'ans are primarily practical items of religious contemplation, they became a leading art form in the Islamic world; Timur's Qur'an was meant to glorify both his rule and the name of God. As a result of the exhibition's immersive environment, *The Art of the Qur'an* invited visitors to interact with the Holy Book of Islam, engaging with its religious themes and artistry. While focused on the aesthetics of the Qur'an, this exhibition was also particularly salient given the current political climate of the United States.

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Images and captions:



Folio from a Qur'an, Near East, Abbasid period, 9th century, ink, gold, and color on parchment. Purchase - Charles Lang Freer Endowment, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. Photo courtesy of Smithsonian Freer | Sackler Galleries.



Single-volume Qur'an, copied by Khan Ahmad Sayri, Iran, Shiraz, Safavid period, dated June 1599, ink, color and gold on paper. Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts, Istanbul, TIEM 531. Photo courtesy of Smithsonian Freer | Sackler Galleries.



Folio from a Qur'an, attributed to Omar Aqta', Historic Iran, present-day Uzbekistan, probably Samarqand, Timurid period, ca. 1400, ink, color, and gold on paper. Long-term loan from the Art and History Trust, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, LTS1995.2.16.1. Photo courtesy of Smithsonian Freer | Sackler Galleries.



View of the Timurid Qur'an from the staircase. Photo courtesy of the author.