

‘So That You Might Know Each Other’

Islamic Faith and Culture explored through the Vatican Museums and the Sharjah Museums collections

Fine embroidered textiles, camel saddles, musical instruments and carved amulets, headline a new exhibition opening on April 19 at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra, which showcases precious objects from the *Anima Mundi* Museum, the section of the Vatican Museums that hosts its extra-European collections, and the Sharjah Museums Authority, United Arab Emirates.

Featuring over 100 precious 18th to 20th century objects from twenty countries, *‘So That You Might Know Each Other’: Islamic Faith and Culture*, illustrates the evolution of Islam across the globe and celebrates diverse Muslim societies from the Middle East, through to Africa and India, China and Southeast Asia.

Inspired by a verse from the Holy Qur’an, the exhibition’s title invites visitors to learn more about each other’s lives, religions and cultures in a spirit of intercultural respect and dialogue.

Including many everyday items, the exhibition – which opens at the National Museum as its only Australian venue - tells the stories of ordinary peoples’ lives, beliefs and cultural traditions.

It is the first time these objects, rarely seen outside their own institutions, have been displayed in Australia.

This unique international collection by Australian objects, which celebrate the contributions made by people of Islamic faith to Australian history.


National Museum of Australia director, Dr Mathew Trinca, said he was delighted Australian audiences would have the opportunity to see these distinctive and beautiful collections.

“Islamic arts and decorative crafts are globally recognized for their beauty and artistry, and we hope this exhibition promotes mutual understanding and dialogue between cultures and faiths,” said Dr Trinca.

Director of the Vatican Museums, Dr Barbara Jatta, said she hopes Australian audiences would embrace the show.

“As I followed the preparation of this exhibition, I was sincerely struck by the beauty and sophistication of the Islamic world - I saw firsthand the refined productions of people living across a vast area stretching from Africa to Australia.”

Director General, Sharjah Museums Authority, Manal Ataya, hoped the exhibition boosted intercultural understanding: “*‘So That You Might Know Each Other’* is an exhibition devised to give a glimpse of the diverse ways of life of Muslims all over the world, and is intended to increase intercultural dialogue and promote tolerance and peace – among Muslims the world over and between Islam and other religions.”



Key objects in the exhibition include a late 19th century wood and leather horse saddle from Tunisia; a late 19th – early 20th century silver coral, horn and glass necklace from Libya; a tapestry wool and silk overcoat from Syria; traditional women’s and men’s costumes from Sharjah; an illuminated Qur’an from Ottoman Turkey; and a 18th-19th century vase from China, combining Islamic inscriptions and Buddhist symbols.

These are complemented by Australian objects from the National Museum’s collection including an intricate bark painting depicting early contact between Aboriginal people in north Australia and Muslim fisherman from Makassar in southern Sulawesi, Indonesia, who came to Australia in search of *trepang* or sea ginger, a delicacy they traded to China as food and medicine.

The exhibition highlights the role Muslims played in the exploration and opening up of huge expanses of outback Australia for the pastoral industry and trade.

On show is a rare original drawing made in 1953, of Bejah Dervish. Described as Australia’s ‘greatest Cameleer’ Bejah was born in Baluchistan (now Pakistan) and came to Australia in 1890 as a camel handler. He excelled in this profession, helping to save members of the ill-fated Calvert Expedition of 1896-97, and later running a successful camel string at Marree, on the Birdsville track, for a further thirty years. It is featured alongside a rare early camel saddle on loan from the Museum of the Arts and Applied Sciences, Sydney.

The ‘Afghans’ or ‘Ghans’, as they became known (although they mainly came from India and present-day Pakistan), pioneered a network of tracks that became the major roads of Central Australia.

They were the first people, apart from the Australian Aborigines, who were able to navigate and survive these challenging terrains. Together with their imported camels, they hauled the equipment, water, food and other supplies needed for building the great desert railways, and, with their work on the Overland Telegraph Line, they helped revolutionise communications in Australia.

From the 1860s - 1920s, an estimated 20,000 camels and 2,000 cameleers reached Australia. While many of the men who were indentured to large agricultural companies returned to their countries of origins, others, like Bejah Dervish, remained, prospering, building mosques and raising families who formed the first Islamic communities in Australia.

Background

Launched in April 2018, ‘*So That You Might Know Each Other*’: *Islamic Faith and Culture*, invites Muslim and non-Muslim people to learn more about each other’s lives across regions, religions, beliefs and cultures. The objects highlight and celebrate the diverse cultures of traditional Muslim societies ranging from Africa and the Middle East, to China, India, Indonesia and Australi

The exhibition is an unprecedented collaboration between the Vatican *Anima Mundi* Museum, the Sharjah Museums Authority and the National Museum of Australia.



Almost five years in the making, the exhibition focuses on areas around the world and in Australia, where Muslim people have settled and created communities.

The objects from the Vatican Museums and Sharjah Museums have not appeared in Australia before, nor have many been on display elsewhere, apart from the previous 2014 exhibition at the Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilisation, Emirate of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates.

The majority of the objects in the exhibition came to the Vatican Museums as gifts sent to Pope Pius XI, on the occasion of the Universal Exposition held in Rome in 1925. These gifts formed the basis of the Vatican Museums' large extra-Europeans collections, recently rebranded as the *Vatican Anima Mundi* ('Soul of the World') Museum.

Almost ninety years later, after preserving and caring for these gifts with the same dedication extended to Italian masterpieces, the Vatican offered a selection of its collection for the exhibition, displayed at the Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilisation in 2014. This first exhibition was also called '*So That You Might Know Each Other*'.

The Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilisation opened in 2008 and is just one of 19 Museums which form the Sharjah Museums Authority (SAM). This Museum and others, including the Sharjah Maritime Museum, Calligraphy Museum, Heritage Museum and the *Bait Al Naboodah* House Museum, have all contributed objects for the exhibition in Canberra.

'So That You Might Know Each Other': Islamic Faith and Culture: 19 April 2018 - 22 July 2018, at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra

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