

Beauty of Heaven on Earth



to see Muhammad 'Ali: Enamelled portrait of Muhammad Shah c. 1834-48

By [Nick Hackworth](#) [Evening Standard](#) | 05 April 2012



” We have Mozart and Michelangelo and they don't,” said the hapless Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi in the aftermath of 9/11 as part of his swiftly condemned bid to talk up a “clash of civilisations” between the West and Islam.

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Though small, this is the most significant exhibition of Islamic Art in London for almost three decades, and will prove an acute reminder of plurality, depth and richness of the old, powerful and subtle culture of the Islamic lands. It gives cause to celebrate the differences between East and West that meant that Islam indeed did not produce Mozart or Michelangelo, but instead other masters of other forms.

Of those forms, it is the calligraphic illumination of the word of God contained in the Koran that is both the centre and pinnacle of Islamic art.

In the second of the five galleries, amid a number of austere simple and irreplaceably ancient Korans, sit two exquisite manuscripts side by side, one from 16th century Iran, the other, a century older, from India.

On their pages, the fruits of the Islamic prohibition of figuration in sacred works are to be seen. In one, the flowing script is shadowed by tendrils of flowers set within golden clouds and bordered by a luxuriant abstraction of crenellated tongues of golden flame, which, in turn, are fringed by a band of deep blue with intricate floral margins.

In the other, panels are set within panels and borders of incredible complexity give way to feathery leaves and chinoiserie lotuses formed in gold and black. Being geometrically and symmetrically perfect, this decoration, with deceptive simplicity, exemplifies the message that God is the creator of all this ordered beauty.

Just as the words are meant to do, the decoration, in its hypnotic beauty is an intimation of God's mind.

In the Islamic lands, as with anywhere at any time, artists, when not in the service of God, are usually in the service of the wealthy and few have ever been as wealthy the Mughal Kings of India.

On show here is a tiny but wonderful example of their opulence, a collection of ornamental flasks, plates, dishes and bracelets sent as a gift to the Russian queen by Nadir Shah in 1741. It was sent by elephant, took two years to arrive, only to find the queen dead. But they still shine gold and red, with diamonds and emeralds studding their inlaid and ruby-encrusted surfaces.

These are just the most eye-catching exhibits among a small wealth of miniatures, cloths, carpets, weapons, vases, rings, dishes and paintings, all of which deserve to be looked at closely, with time and empathy.

Until 22 August. Information: 020 7845 4630.
