

Negotiating difference: Islamic identity on display

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Abstract

In this paper I explore the capacity of museums to promote cross-cultural understanding through displays of Islamic art and culture. The intensity and prevalence of Islamophobia in Australia often radicalises western Muslims and reinforces the East–West divide affecting notions of nation, Islamic identity and citizenship. I question the ‘Art of Islam: Treasures from the Nasser D Khalili Collection’ travelling exhibition’s impact on and interrelations with resulting institutional and societal tensions. In illustration, I will discuss preliminary findings from interviews and focus groups in relation to this exhibition event. I will position this case study in the wider context of the politics of display in terms of how non-western cultures are portrayed by western institutions and whether these exhibitions contribute to developing greater understanding between Muslim and non-Muslim communities specifically, and present alternative local and global images of the Arab/Muslim world generally.

Introduction

As researchers we are often asked why we investigate certain cultural phenomena, what relevance our research outcomes will have and whether our findings can have any impact upon societal problems. When I first began this project in 2007, events such as the Cronulla

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riots and a preoccupation with the Islamic ‘problem’ were affecting our country’s psyche and our image internationally. Therefore, research attempting to improve relations between Muslim and non-Muslim communities was seen as not only topical but essential to moving forward in such a culturally diverse and sometimes volatile nation as Australia. Fast track to the present day and statistical findings such as those from the MyPeace group in 2011 confirm that the issue of understanding Islam and Islamic communities is as controversial a topic as ever:

the rise of Islam is the second biggest issue facing Australian society (17%) ahead of climate change (12%) and refugees and boat people (7%), it’s evident that there’s a great divide between what people understand to be the principles of our religion and the principles in reality. (vinienco.com 2011)

In this paper I draw upon empirical research from a larger study investigating the capacity of art museums to encourage cross-cultural understanding between Muslim and non-Muslim audiences through displays of Islamic artefacts and culture. Institutions such as museums have traditionally been viewed as bastions of culture and civilisation, educating and guiding their diverse audiences by providing quiet spaces for contemplation and reflection, removed from the outside world. However, contemporary museums are ‘contested terrain’ (Lavine and Karp 1991: 1), with hot debates raging over their function, viability and relevance to modern audiences and society in general.

The focus of this paper is the travelling exhibition *Art of Islam: Treasures from the Khalili Collections*, first shown at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW), Sydney, in 2007 (from here on referred to as the AoIE). I will analyse particular practices and policies of display and the success of the exhibition in the eyes of institutions, organisers, community groups and audiences (both Muslim and non-Muslim). My analysis will be informed by textual documentation and empirical findings from 22 interviews, 4 focus groups, conversations and observational studies.

The case study: powerful spaces, significant stories

The Khalili Collection had lent objects to over 50 museums and been part of more than 35 exhibitions in America and Europe prior to 2007, but this travelling show (from 2007 to 2011) was the first example of the Khalili Trust itself touring a substantial number of the collection's works. The AoIE attracted over 75,000 visitors to the AGNSW from 22 June – 23 September 2007 and was transnational, including works from Spain, Turkey, North Africa, India, Syria, Iran and China and spanning the seventh to twentieth centuries. The display was accompanied by a comprehensive catalogue, extensive lecture series, film screenings, musical performances, educational programs, celebrity talks and events such as an international symposium, conference and community day.

The major sponsor was Professor Nasser D Khalili, whose collection of Islamic art is one of the most thoroughly researched and published in the world. Khalili is passionate about collecting Islamic art, not because it is Islamic but because these objects are 'the most beautiful' creations in the art world. He defines Islamic art as 'works produced by Muslim artists for Muslim patrons ... [that is not] exclusively religious' (Khalili Family Trust 2011). Khalili describes his role as a collector as fulfilling four criteria:

to purchase art, to conserve art, to research art, and to exhibit art. When you have done this, you have done something for humanity ... I consider myself a mere custodian and responsible for the well-being of these objects ... ownership is a myth. (*Arabian Knight* 2008: 61, 64)

The Independent newspaper in the UK has described Khalili's motives for collecting as 'idealistic and educational. He wants the world to understand these things better and value them more highly' (Gayford 2004).

The wider social imperatives of the AoIE, which various media detailed, were clearly articulated by Edmund Capon, director of AGNSW, when he stated:

The very word Islam casts both light and shadow over our contemporary world. I believe there has never been a greater need for the wealth and imagination of Islamic cultures and artistic heritage to be revealed ... to both Islamic and non-Islamic communities. (AGNSW 2007)

Khalili added to this sentiment by maintaining that

All truly great art has a way of transcending political and religious boundaries, and the arts of this land are no exception ... Religion and politics have their own languages, but the language of art is universal ... I use my collection as a language for building bridges ... [Beyond their beauty the objects show that] the arts can help remove misunderstandings between Jews and Muslims, or Christians and Muslims ... the greatest weapon of mass destruction is ignorance. (Khalili 2007)

The AoIE was opened by Minister Barbara Perry of the government of New South Wales on Friday 22 June 2007. Her speech echoed Capon and Khalili's socio-cultural aims and confirmed the government's commitment to sponsoring multicultural events. Perry was the MP for Western Sydney and Auburn; therefore her responsibility for representing some of Australia's largest Islamic communities was evident:

in this post-September 11 and post-Bali era, every Australian of Islamic background should come and see this exhibition ... It is an invitation for engagement between civilisations. An engagement based on mutual respect. An engagement written in the humane and unifying language of art. It is – above all other things – simply beautiful. (AGNSW 2007)

The AoIE was in fact part of the AGNSW Principles of Multiculturalism and Ethnic Affairs priority outcomes 2007–08, as outlined in section 3 of the *Community Relations Commission and Principles of Multiculturalism Act 2000*. In working to achieve the objectives of their policy, the gallery had a mandate to present exhibitions and education programs promoting 'respectful

intercultural community relations: leadership, community harmony, access and equality, and economic and cultural opportunities' (AGNSW 2008).

The organisers emphasised many times that over 95 per cent of the works on display were secular, drawing attention to the aesthetic nature of the exhibition rather any political or religious context. However, both Capon and Khalili conceded that in Islam 'every aspect of life is dedicated to the almighty' (McLeod 2007a). The exhibited objects were diverse, both culturally and aesthetically, including illuminated manuscripts and Qur'ans, colourful ceramics and enamel objects, lustre-painted glass, lacquer ware and finely woven textiles. Media reports of the AoIE were overwhelmingly positive but, rather than highlighting their differences, it was the artefacts' similarities that were repeatedly emphasised. Many articles supported the view that, though the works on display revealed the nature and range of the Khalili collection, the main aim of the exhibition was to promote peace and understanding by demonstrating the shared cultural heritage of Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Several reports contained the statement by Khalili that the artworks 'tell us that Islamic religion was a religion of tolerance, and the three religions lived side by side in harmony for centuries'. It was a 'fact' that it was not unusual for Muslim and Jewish artists to work together on art commissioned by Muslim rulers and Christian patrons during the golden age of Islamic art (from 750 to the sixteenth century). In addition, Muslim and Moorish weavers worked alongside Jewish dyers in Central Asia and Andalusia (McLeod 2007a).

Examples cited to illustrate this perspective included: a fifteenth-century manuscript depicting Mohammed encircled by his relatives as well as depictions of Moses, Mary and Jesus, illustrating the connections between the three religions; an Iranian flask not unlike objects from the Ming dynasty; several decorations that were noticeably Buddhist; and the Jonah and the whale tale (which is told in both the Bible and Qur'an) that appears in Rashid-Al Din's *History of the world* on display, the first survey of Muslim history written from the viewpoint of the Mongol conquerors in 1314–15. This manuscript came from the Asiatic Society's collection and for a decade was the most valuable work of art ever sold at auction (McLeod 2007a, 2007b).

There were four general groups of key stakeholders in the AoIE: institutional agencies (AGNSW curators, community and exhibition programmers, exhibition registrar, exhibition and catalogue designers); entrepreneurial philanthropists/private sponsors (collection owner and curatorial staff, Westfield, National Australian Bank, AGNSW Presidents Council, VisAsia); federal, state and local government involvement (Australian Arabic Relations under the Commonwealth Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, NSW Department for Arts, Sports and Recreation, Minister Barbara Perry); and participating community groups (the Affinity Intercultural Foundation, Al-ghazzali Centre for Islamic Sciences and Human Development and the Islamic Friendship Association of Australia).

All stakeholders viewed the AoIE as a highly successful collaborative venture. When referring to the AoIE in the AGNSW *Annual report 2007-08* Edmund Capon reflected that,

in retrospect, I think this was one of the most significant exhibitions that this gallery has ever undertaken ... the exhibition was particularly timely, for the non-Muslim world congress to know more of the great histories and cultures of the countries that comprise the Muslim world. (AGNSW 2008: 31)

The financial success of the exhibition was evident in the record ticket sales. The AoIE attracted more than double the number of visitors of any other exhibition that year, drawing crowds comparable to those visiting the annual Archibald, Wynne and Sulman Prize Exhibition 2007, one of the most visited exhibits in the country (AGNSW 2008).

Other related exhibition activities were also lucrative endeavours. The Ages of Islam, a series of 14 lectures from May to July, was sold out by May 2007; as was the 13-week film screening of the movie *Shiraz*. The lecture series was advertised as an ‘introduction to one of the world’s great religions, as it is probably the least understood and most often misrepresented in the West today ... to show how a multi-faith, tolerant and ideas-laden civilisation could develop’.

The special event ‘David Khalili in conversation with Bob Carr’, former Premier of New South Wales, was fully booked, attracting 320 participants.

Education programs ran in conjunction with the exhibition, targeting student from kindergarten through to Year 12, including teachers’ exhibition previews and Years K-6 teachers’ holiday workshops offering free education kits. These programs were a great success with both teachers and students, with one art teacher, Evelyn Tomazos of Bankstown West Public School, using the AoIE as stimulus for a complete unit of work for her Year 5 and 6 students. As 50 per cent of her pupils were Muslims, she considered that ‘These children need to feel there’s something very positive about their art and background’ (NSW Public Schools 2008). As part of the National Action Plan to Build on Social Cohesion, Harmony and Security (NAP), an initiative of the federal, state and territory governments, transport and entry to the Arts of Islam exhibition was provided for approximately 600 primary and high school students in the Western Sydney region. Other educational activities included Islamic storytelling and workshops, scheduled twice a week over three weeks in the 2007 July school holiday period (AGNSW 2007).

Muslim community involvement was an important social and cultural focus of the activities related to the exhibition. Khalili commented: ‘the Muslim community in Australia needs a bit of support of seeing their own culture. I’m happy to bring these artworks here. It is a good move’ (*Australian Jewish News* 2007). Participants included the Affinity Intercultural Foundation (AIF), established in 2001 by young Australian Muslims, with the mission ‘to create and sustain enduring affinity and relationships with people through inter-cultural and inter-faith dialogue and understanding’. Their presence at the AoIE ‘101 Questions Day’ and Wednesday ‘After Dark’ evening events was considered an important part of both the AGNSW and AIF’s educational and informative community programs, aimed at encouraging dialogue and interaction between Australians of different backgrounds and faiths. Importantly, Mehmet Ozalp, author and president of AIF, gave a celebrity talk on 1 August 2007 focusing on intercultural and interfaith dialogue from his two books, *101 questions you asked about Islam* (which the AGNSW session was named after) and *Islam in the modern world*.

Two other community events were the Art of Islam Symposium on Friday 22 June and the Community Day on Saturday 23 June 2007. Speakers included Edmund Capon, Prof Nasser Khalili, Nahla Nasser (acting curator and registrar of the Khalili collection), JM Rogers (honorary curator of the Khalili collection), with Qur'an recitations by Sheikh Ahmad Abu Ghazaleh, workshops with calligrapher Salem Mansour, and question time with volunteers from the Al-Ghazzali Centre (AGNSW 2007).

In the eyes of the sponsors the AoIE was clearly a success. The Council for Australian-Arab Relations (CAAR), an initiative of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DEFAT), was one of the major government sponsors, funding a symposium and a fundraising dinner which raised approximately \$50,000 for AGNSW acquisitions. The council stated in its annual report of 2006-07 that its sponsorship of the AoIE had been 'an outstanding promotion for the work of the CAAR' (CAAR 2007).

For Khalili there were some obvious benefits from his sponsorship of the AoIE. As art critic John McDonald commented,

Even though no one doubts the sincerity of his interest in Islamic art, or his desire to reconcile the Muslim, Jewish and Christian worlds, Khalili's philanthropy has helped boost the presumed value of his collection, which is now believed to be worth billions of pounds. Perhaps a few of our own billionaires should take note: by helping others in an apparently disinterested fashion you can also help yourself. (McDonald 2007)

Social-political context: unrest in Australia

Museums often consider themselves removed from the concerns of the world outside their doors but consistent political and social unrest in Australia and a barrage of associated media images concerning Muslims and Islam inevitably would have affected the attitudes and opinions of their visitors. This was especially the case with the series of riots in December 2005 at the Sydney beachside suburb of Cronulla, and later Maroubra, instigated by Anglo-Celtic factions against Lebanese Muslims, which received high levels of media coverage and

led to further inquiry into ethnic relations and multiculturalism in Australia within political and media discourses.

In addition to the Cronulla riots, there had been a range of media reports and ‘images’ that had fuelled cultural tensions. Instances included: NSW MP, the Reverend Fred Nile, in 2002 who urged the government to consider ‘banning the wearing of the hijab in public places as a security precaution, because it could be used by terrorists to conceal weapons and explosives’ (*The Age*, 4 Dec 2002); the *Sydney Morning Herald’s* article on 4 February 2006 titled ‘Riot order: avoid Middle Eastern men’; Sheik el Hilaly’s comments in late 2006 comparing ‘scantly clad women to raw meat left out for cats’ (Kerbaj 2006); and the fear that extremists were seeking local Somali recruits in Melbourne in 2007 (*The Age*, 13 April 2007).

Furthermore, intense opposition to a proposed Islamic school in Camden, Sydney involved a local residents’ campaign of strategically stereotyping Muslims as ‘fanatical, intolerant, militant, fundamentalist, misogynist and alien’, culminating in protesters ramming two pigs’ heads on to metal stakes, with an Australian flag between them. This was similar to a previous incident in 2004, when a severed pig’s head was impaled in front of a Muslim prayer centre in Annangrove, Sydney (K Dunn, *ABC News*, 28 November 2007).

Understanding, desire and the transforming power of art

Considering the social, racial and political tensions existing in Australia prior to 2007, what strategies did the promoters of the exhibition employ to counteract ‘negative’ images and how can the degree of success of this common desire for cross-cultural understanding be measured?

Exhibition organisers and curators hoped to actualise their desire to promote cross-cultural understanding through their own knowledge of how spaces work, how art affects audiences and how the visual and sensory experience can be harnessed to produce desired effects. Through the practices and policies of display, museums transform the cultural object into a transmitter of new meanings and values, altering and disrupting cultural, social and political

nuances associated with its creation. This process seeks to deploy the art object and aesthetic experiences as a function of government, having the power to civilise, to produce self-regulating citizens through what Foucault (1988) described as the ‘technologies of the self’.

Exhibitions are therefore never ‘neutral’; they are ‘constructed’ and ‘motivated’ by their ‘cultural producers’. They are ‘spaces of representation’, places of translation and meaning construction where the viewer encounters objects, visual representations, textual information, reconstructions and sounds creating ‘an intricate and bounded representational system’ (Lidchi 1995: 168). The visitor may consciously and physically travel through this highly mediated exhibition space but unconsciously and conceptually opinions, viewpoints and mindsets may or may not be altered. As Stuart Hall explained, positive experiences cannot be guaranteed to occur as during this process of engagement ‘competing, conflicting and contested meanings and interpretations’ can be experienced by the viewer (1995a: 9). This is because meaning in terms of objects, people and events in themselves do not possess fixed, constant, final or true meaning but are slippery, ‘changing and shifting with context, usage and historical circumstances’ (Hall 1995a: 10). Societies and the people within them make meaning, and these meanings can alter from one culture to another as cultural codes (the classification systems that assign meaning to the world). Thus, the mental images and concepts people ‘carry around in their heads’ differ, so the world can be decoded and translated in a variety of ways according to individual and community norms, customs and belief systems (Hall 1995b: 62).

There are also varying limits among people in terms of levels of perception. How many engage beyond the surface properties of the ‘beautiful object’, confident they possess what Bourdieu calls ‘cultural capital’, the ability to ‘see through’ objects on display to uncover the concealed order of art which underlies their arrangement, the ‘politics of the invisible’ (1984: 172). Additionally, glass display cases, enclosed spaces and technological innovations that are designed to enhance the visitor experience also act as barriers, creating distance between the viewer and the ‘real’ object. Descriptive and didactic textual panels and labels that allow for individual interpretation are decoded and translated via individual and cultural codes of

understanding. Not everyone comes to an exhibition for the same reasons and with similar expectations of the experience they will have.

The opinion of others

Organisers saw the exhibition as a resounding success but what did visitors see and think? What were their perceptions, attitudes and interests? Was there any evidence that this display created a greater awareness of Islam and Islamic communities and encouraged cross-cultural understanding between Muslim and non-Muslim audiences?

Data obtained from individual interviews, focus groups, conversations and observational studies revealed that, while many visitors did want to be more informed about Islam and Islamic culture and learn something from the objects and their labels, many others regarded the exhibition as a social outing and not necessarily an educational event. Some Muslim interviewees viewed all the artworks on display as appropriate and tasteful, while other Muslims (particularly Sunni Muslims) were offended by the statement that the exhibition was 95 per cent secular, as they believed all art was made for God and therefore religious. In addition, some interviewees considered that the use of images depicting the prophet Mohammad (especially his face) was inappropriate and offensive. One participant stated that her family left the exhibition because of depictions of Mohammad and that there should have been a warning sign at the exhibition entrance. Several interviewees were surprised, and some suspicious, of why a Jewish person was displaying Islamic art and, despite most focus group participants agreeing that a beautiful work of art can transcend political, religious and cultural boundaries, several believed dialogue was essential to understanding another perspective. As one participant commented, ‘when you look at an artwork from another culture you have questions and then you want to ask someone or at least talk to someone about it’.

So far this research has failed to locate any Muslim who attended the community day arranged by the gallery (many commented that they prefer to go to locally organised events) and I have found no Muslims who attended the lectures, as they were seen by Muslim focus group participants as too expensive and were sold out well in advance anyway. It appears that



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unless they had free tickets and transport, Muslim community groups interviewed said not many of their members would ever travel into the city or to a gallery there. Despite lectures, talks, Q and A sessions and access to Muslim volunteers at information counters, most interviewees did not report engaging in or observing conversations between culturally different groups. Several female volunteers believed that wearing the hijab probably ‘put non-Muslim people off’ asking them questions. Many of the focus group participants felt other events like mosque open days and guided tours, If tar dinners during Ramadan where Muslims and non-Muslims eat together, local festivals like ones at shopping malls, advertisements like the MyPeace ones on TV, and billboards and movies like the British comedy film about Muslim suicide bombers, *Four lions*, did more to address misconceptions about Islam and Muslims and break down barriers (interview/focus group transcripts, 2010–2011).



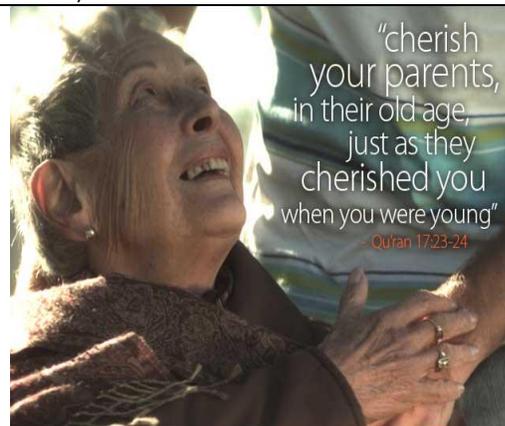
Auburn Mosque open day, 2011 (photo: the author)



Auburn Mosque open day, Mosque tour, 2011 (photo: the author)



Television commercials aired on Australian stations, 2011 (source: Mypeace.com.au)



Television commercials aired on Australian stations, 2011 (source: Mypeace.com.au)

Conclusion

I have discussed an exhibition space showcasing spectacular visual displays designed to lead visitors on a physical and conceptual journey. Stakeholders unanimously agreed that their aim to contribute to a greater understanding of Islam and Islamic communities was achieved through practices and policies of display aiming to disrupt and re-configure knowledges and social issues in the minds of their audiences by harnessing the reforming power of the cultural artefact and the aesthetic experience.

However, my research findings reveal that this perception of success was not shared equally between exhibition organisers and their viewing public, with many barriers standing in the way of their stated goal. With an array of societal tensions and negative ‘images’ of Muslims and Islam circulating, with differences in coding and decoding by culturally diverse audiences viewing these ‘systems of representation’, and limitations on individual perception and motivation, this exhibition site was required to perform a variety of often contradictory functions to meet the expectations of stakeholders and audiences. It was simultaneously a place of leisure and pleasure for many, as well as educational and transformative experiences for some.

My larger research question is whether aesthetic experiences reform, inform and change people or are they simply interventions in the representational machinery and discursive landscape that may or may not impact upon anyone other than those already ‘converted’, those wedded to a liberal-humanist vision of tolerance and harmonious co-existence? My empirical research suggests that for displays of cultural objects to achieve their goals they need to be complemented by other activities that engage different communities in dialogue at communal events in ‘ordinary spaces’ on the level of ‘everyday multiculturalism’ which have the potential to become arenas where cross-cultural understanding can occur and more meaningful and permanent bridges can be built across cultures and within communities.

As Kwame Appiah reminds us,

Conversations across boundaries of identity – whether national, religious, or something else ... [are] hardly guaranteed to lead to agreement about what to think and feel ... but [they are] a metaphor for engagement with the experience and ideas of others ... Conversation doesn't have to lead to consensus about anything, especially not values; it's enough that it helps people get used to one another. (Appiah 2006: 85)

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