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A Gallery of the Islamic World vs. a Gallery of the Middle East

Fahmida Suleman

When I arrived at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) as the new curator of Islamic Art and Culture in January 2019, I was on a career high. I had worked at the British Museum for ten years, the last three dedicated to a gallery reinstallation project, and we finally unveiled the much-fêted Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic World in October 2018. A few weeks later, I was on a flight to Toronto in search of new challenges and horizons. Although I had spent the last twenty-four years in the UK completing my graduate studies and working in the field of Islamic art, first as a lecturer and then a curator, I had grown up in Toronto and my University of Toronto (UoT) undergraduate classes on Islamic art and archaeology were taught by curators at the ROM. Those were some of the most memorable aspects of my undergraduate education and I was determined to incorporate visits to the ROM's galleries and collections as part of my pedagogy as a cross-appointed faculty member at UoT. In addition, I envisioned a series of guided tours in the ROM's Wirth Gallery of the Middle East as a natural way to connect with diverse communities across Ontario who may have otherwise felt disengaged from the museum world and what it had to offer. I have been at the ROM for over three years now (the last two under pandemic restrictions and intermittent closures) and have come to realise the number of challenges ahead of me in making the collections more accessible and the displays more impactful for museum audiences. Many of the issues stem from the architecture of the gallery itself and the design choices taken in exhibiting the artefacts to accommodate the building's structure. Other issues are tied to curatorial decisions on the themes and approaches selected for the displays,

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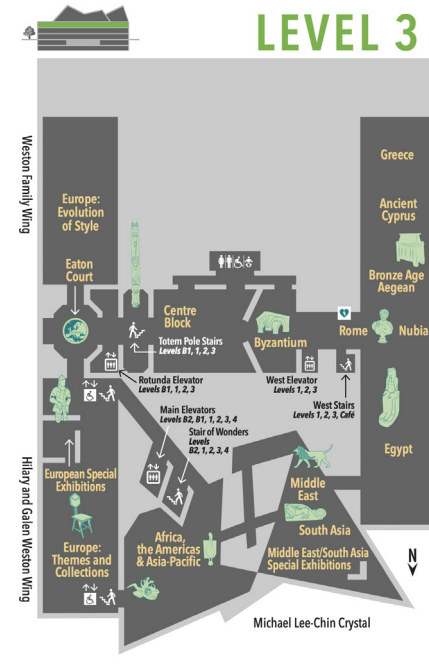


Fig. 1. Ground plan indicating the triangular footprint of the Middle East and South Asian Galleries and the “corridor.”
Courtesy of the ROM.



Fig. 2. The “Hymns and Talismans” display with a mix of artefacts from vastly different eras. Note the lack of contrast between the sand-coloured artefacts against the light yellow display panel and the numerous shadows cast by the objects in poorly lit conditions. Photo: Fahmida Suleman.

including planning a gallery of the Middle East as opposed to a gallery of the Islamic world. I will try to summarise the main points around these two areas and share my strategies for potential ways forward.

The ROM's Wirth Gallery of the Middle East opened in 2008 as part of a suite of new galleries designed for the "Renaissance ROM" capital building project which expanded the museum's footprint by over 100,000 square feet. The Daniel Libeskind-designed building, named the Michael Lee-Chin Crystal, is inspired by crystalline forms from the ROM's mineralogy collection. The dramatic structure comprises five metal-clad "crystal volumes" that are interlocking, self-supported structures devoid of any right angles and with only one vertical wall. The ROM's new wing is crystal-like in form on the outside and inside. This design has had a profoundly negative impact on the displays in the Wirth Gallery of the Middle East.¹ Situated on the third floor of the Crystal building, the Middle East gallery shares a triangular floorplan with the Sir Christopher Ondaatje South Asian Gallery. | **fig. 1** | A narrow corridor-like area emerges from the southern apex of the triangle, extending a portion of the Middle East gallery. Additionally, all the walls in the gallery are slanted and piers jut out in inconvenient places from the floor to support the sides of the Crystal. Hence, the perimeter walls of the gallery cannot be used for maps, contextual images and graphics (such as historic quotations), AV monitors, or even to support object display cases. The gallery's triangular footprint also makes it difficult to create directionality or an intentional pathway through the gallery.

Some of the tall Glasbau Hahn showcases are also designed with angular sides to echo crystalline forms. Object label texts in the cases are minimal and often placed at a distance from the artefacts, in keeping with the building's modern, minimalist design. The choice of light yellow painted in-case panels seems misjudged, given that most of the ancient archeological artefacts are

unglazed sand-coloured objects that completely blend into the background. | **fig. 2** | Despite the absence of straight walls, a sound decision was taken to design a vertical wall in order to safely mount and display two magnificent Safavid tile arches. Regrettably, these are hidden behind a slanted wall within the "corridor-extension" and only visible to those curious enough to turn an awkward corner of the gallery. Curious visitors are rewarded with some of the ROM's greatest ceramic treasures from ancient Mesopotamia and Sasanian Iran and from medieval and pre-modern Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Egypt. | **fig. 3** | The final design challenge worth highlighting is the absence of in-case lighting to illuminate individual objects. Hence, the objects are only lit by the ceiling lights high above the cases, creating shadows and poorly lit artworks and artefacts in many instances (fig. 2).

There is not much I can do as a curator regarding the structural and case design of the existing gallery, apart from conceptually planning for a new gallery and helping to raise funding for such an ambitious, multi-million dollar project. However, as one of two curators of the Wirth Gallery, I have agency to affect small, incremental changes within individual case displays, provided there are sufficient human and financial resources available. In the next section, I will share some of the curatorial changes that I would like to gradually implement over the course of the next few years in collaboration with my co-curator, Professor Clemens Reichel, the ROM's Curator of Ancient Near Eastern Archaeology.

The first large introductory panel encountered by visitors frames the Middle East as "a cradle of civilization" on which "the foundations of our own civilization were established more than 5000 years ago," a region described as the birthplace of the "first organized religions...astronomy, mathematics, writing and account-keeping...and a wide range of technological innovations." Although this introductory text is better suited to a gallery of the Ancient

1. Daniel Viola provides a neat summation of past and present conflicting opinions about the Libeskind Crystal following the building's tenth anniversary, "Revisiting Canada's Most Hated Building," *Azure Magazine*, June 2, 2017, <https://www.azuremagazine.com/article/ROM-crystal-10-years-later/>.

Near East, the curators took the bold decision to combine both the ancient and Islamic collections together and oftentimes integrated them in the same display case under a common theme. This strategy is successful at times—for example, in a discussion of the origins and development of writing within the region, the display case includes a huge range of objects such as cuneiform tablets from Mesopotamia, a ceramic bowl inscribed with a proverb from tenth-century Samarqand, an eighteenth-century scroll with the Hebrew Book of Esther inside a gilded silver filigree case, and a nineteenth-century wooden Qur’an board from Morocco. In other instances the juxtapositions are less convincing, such as a case devoted to “Hymns and Talismans” which engages with the thorny subject of magic, divination, and the use of talismans and amulets. Here, Mandaean incantation bowls from the third century CE jostle with magic bowls and amuletic jewelry from the nineteenth century that are inscribed with Qur’anic verses and Arabic numerals (fig. 2). One of the many problems with creating thematic stories about the Middle East in this way is that it flattens the diversity and nuanced beliefs and practices of people across centuries from many civilizations and cultures. The result is that this, inadvertently, reinforces misperceptions of an unchanging, timeless, and singular Middle Eastern civilization. The only sensible solution is to extract and separate the ancient and medieval objects within the displays in order to tell stories of greater depth about peoples of specific regions and time periods.

This leads me to two significant gaps within the gallery’s curatorial narrative. The first is the absence of the human element within the stories presented in the gallery. By this I mean that, oftentimes, the objects are presented in a cultural vacuum without engaging with the people who made or used them, their perceptions about the objects, or the contexts in which the objects functioned. There is a strong emphasis on processes and innovations in craft technol-

ogies as well as “external influences,” such as the impact of certain Chinese or European artistic idioms on the arts of the Islamic Middle East, but almost nothing about the historical, political, and cultural contexts and, indeed, cross-cultural connections resulting in new artistic styles. The second area that needs to be addressed is the chronological disruption in the gallery post-nineteenth century, as though cultural production worthy of museum display came to a halt. There is very little on display from the early twentieth century and nothing shown from the late twentieth century to the present day. This division does not reflect the collections, which include objects from the twentieth century as well as twenty-first century artefacts and modern and contemporary artworks. By incorporating later material in the gallery, we will be able to tell more contemporary, compelling stories while underscoring the importance of art and material culture produced in modern times, which many visitors may find engaging, especially those who feel a connection to the region. The inclusion of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century material in the gallery will also provide opportunities to explore issues such as colonialism and Orientalism alongside discussions about how objects came into the ROM’s collections during this time.

An aspect of the Wirth Gallery that requires more immediate attention is the disproportionate presence of arms and armour within three separate displays in the gallery, including several full-sized mannequins dressed in military regalia from head to toe, holding spears, swords, and shields. Although the displays cover a range of themes (e.g. “Arms and Armour,” “Archery,” “The Hunt,” and “The Horse”), together, their visual impact creates an imbalanced perception of the cultures of the Middle East as mainly occupied by war. | **fig. 4** | Solutions have already been devised to redress this imbalance by reinstalling two of the cases. One will display a selection of textiles from the ROM’s vast collections and will be rotated each year to

highlight a different geographical region, with the first installation focusing on Central Asian textiles, garments and jewellery. The second case will house a more permanent display of objects from the British excavations at Nimrud, the seventh-century BCE Assyrian city in Northern Mesopotamia (Iraq). The latter display will also discuss issues around the destruction of Iraqi cultural heritage in recent times. The timeline of these reinstallations will rely heavily on the availability of human and financial resources.

Apart from these and other incremental changes, we also have to find solutions within the existing design to provide docents (tour guides), school groups, researchers, and general visitors with clear and effective ways to navigate and appreciate the gallery displays. One interpretive strategy that has proved immensely successful at the British Museum is the use of so-called “gateway objects.” By selecting the most important object in a case and highlighting it prominently—both through the design and with an information label—visitors are immediately drawn to the object, which acts as a “gateway” to the overarching narrative of the case. Another necessary addition to the gallery is a large-scale map to help visitors geographically situate the material culture on display. We also live in a world of selfies and Instagram as a way of engaging with what is around us and our connection to it. Introducing moments for self-reflection and engagement within the gallery using smartphones and other digital media is key to the success of any museum gallery.

A gallery of the Middle East or the Islamic world? Although the term “Islamic world” may not be ideal when describing the multi-ethnic and multi-religious cultures of the countries within a vast area that spans West Africa to Southeast Asia today, I still prefer conceptualising a gallery of the Islamic world rather than one limited to the Middle East. The combination of ancient and medieval material in the Wirth Gallery of the Middle East is fraught with issues.



Fig. 3. The hidden “corridor-extension” has some of the ROM’s greatest treasures, including the Safavid tile arches, glazed ceramics, and the Babylonian lion frieze tucked in a corner of the gallery. Photo: Fahmida Suleman.

Furthermore, the current gallery already includes objects from regions outside the Middle East, including North Africa and Central Asia. The ROM holds Canada's largest collection of artefacts from the Islamic world, with around 10,000 objects spanning six curatorial areas: Islamic World; Global Africa; Global South Asia; China; Europe; and Global Fashion and Textiles. Additionally, many museum staff are cross-appointed as professors at UofT and other institutions of higher learning, enabling them to teach and provide students with hands-on learning opportunities using the ROM's rich collections and to continue generating world class research and publications in the fields of Islamic art, archaeology, architecture, and ethnography. The time is ripe to reconceptualize the current gallery and offer more inclusive and engaging experiences for our diverse audiences. ◀



Fig. 4. The “Arms and Armour” and “Archery” cases with full size mannequins are prominent displays in the Wirth Gallery.
Photo: Fahmida Suleman.