

Anisa Buckley

***The First Islamic Museum of Australia:
challenging negative assumptions of Muslims
in Australia through art, heritage and
discovery***

MUSEUMS ARE SITES that offer significant educational and cultural experiences, and those that are established by minority cultural communities in multicultural Western societies present a unique opportunity for visitors to view aspects of life through the eyes of these communities that are not often available elsewhere. Muslims in Australia are considered a minority cultural community, not only by virtue of demographics but also due to politics and media representation, particularly since international events such as 9/11 and subsequent local events, including the Cronulla riots, which portrayed Islam and Muslims in general in a negative light and have contributed to substantial stereotypes and misconceptions.

The establishment of the first Islamic Museum of Australia (hereafter IMA), founded in May 2010 and due to open late 2013/early 2014 seeks to contribute in some way in countering these negative perceptions of Islam and Muslims by creating a leading cultural and educational institution designed to highlight works of beauty through art and architecture, to focus on shared values and common heritage, and to demonstrate that Muslims in Australia have actively contributed to society in the past and are continuing to contribute in many positive ways – as are many other faiths and cultures – and in so doing are a part of mainstream Australian society.

This article will explore how the founding of the IMA intends to serve as a space for positive self-expression for Australian Muslims and act as a means of breaking down cultural barriers between Muslims and mainstream Australian society. Although the primary aim of the IMA is educating visitors about Islamic art and Muslim heritage and history in Australia – not in solving social issues – it is hoped that through such education, some of these issues may be addressed in the process. The first two sections provide a brief overview of the circumstances over the past decade that have caused a ‘cultural gap’ to emerge between Muslims and mainstream Australian society, contributing to numerous assumptions about Muslims and Islam. The following sections introduce the IMA and describes the developments and achievements of this unique institution. The final section utilises the IMA’s threefold motto of ‘Art – Heritage – Discovery’ to explore how the IMA aims to bridge this cultural gap through Islamic art and Muslim heritage, aiming to promote a greater understanding of Islam and Muslims in Australia and worldwide.

The ‘Cultural Gap’

Although Muslims have a long history in Australia, media coverage of numerous international events involving Muslims since the late twentieth century have contributed to them becoming an increasingly marginalised and ostracised community, most particularly over the past decade. Such events include the 1979 Iranian Revolution and 1991 First Gulf War, through to the more recent events of the 9/11 Twin Towers attack, the 2002 Bali bombings and the 2005 Cronulla riots. Although it is correct to say that Muslims were involved in all of these events, the issue of concern is the approach taken by Western journalists and news agencies in presenting and reporting these events as indicative of all Muslims worldwide, instead of the actions and/or beliefs of a few. As Howard Brasted notes:

A stereotypical representation of Islam has resulted based on mental and material images of Muslims at war and under challenge: as Arabs, as terrorists, as mullahs, as veiled and veiling women, as passive and proselytising communities of believers.¹

This mostly negative portrayal of Muslims in Western media throughout these events has caused a cultural gap to emerge between Muslims and the wider Australian community, with the collective impact of these images symbolising Muslims as irrational, fanatical, intolerant and discriminatory.² As a result, many Muslims have struggled to articulate a sense of identity due to being part of a religious community on one hand, and living in a Western society that seems to be based on very different cultural values than their own, on the other. This is particularly relevant to young people who are born or raised in Australia as second-generation Muslims. In a 2006 study on Muslim youth identity involving 225 interviews with Muslim youth in Sydney, Melbourne and Perth, Nahid Kabir found that this struggle for identity led some Muslims to distance themselves from mainstream Australian society, while others who wished to interact with mainstream society encountered barriers and challenges, even those who were not identifiably ‘Muslim’:

Amina observed that although she was born in Australia, did not wear the hijab, and attended a state school, some Australian students at an earlier school had considered her to be the ‘other’, which she attributed in turn to the stance taken by some politicians and media.³

Some youths who actively identified themselves as Muslims – such as girls who wore the hijab – faced questions about their Australian identity, and therefore felt less connected to Australian society, mainly due to commentary on Muslims in the media.⁴ Although many Muslim youth exhibited bi-cultural interests through attending the mosque as well as participating in mainstream society activities such as playing soccer, the notion of a ‘cultural gap’ still exists between Muslims and Australian society, whereby many Muslim youth feel that they must choose between the culture of their parents and the culture of mainstream society if they want to ‘fit in’.

Assumptions About Muslims in Australia

The presumed cultural differences between Muslims and Australian society – influenced by political commentary and media portrayal of Muslims and Islam – have led to various perceptions about Islam and Muslims among non-Muslim Australians. Some of these perceptions include notions that Muslims follow backward and outdated cultural practices and wish to impose these practices on others, that they are predominantly new arrivals and represent a monolithic community, and that Islam as a religion is alien to mainstream Australian society.⁵ These perceptions can be categorised into various assumptions that position the culture and values of Muslims and Islam as contradictory to the culture and values of Australian society and the West in general. These assumptions are: Muslims are homogenous, foreign, newly arrived, anti-Western and insular. In this article I discuss how the IMA seeks to counter these assumptions by encouraging visitors to rethink the relationship between Muslims and mainstream Australian society, and find that the cultural gap between the two is not as wide as expected.

Between 2005 and 2007, a nation-wide project was conducted by a think-tank organisation Issues Deliberation Australia/America (IDA) seeking greater clarification about the relationship between Muslim and non-Muslim Australians. The purpose of this project was to provide a comprehensive picture of the state of relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in Australia by comparing the knowledge and opinions of both parties before and after meeting each other, and learning more about the issues affecting Muslim and non-Muslim relations through discussing with peers and questioning competing experts. Initial consultations were conducted with over a hundred experts including religious, academic, community, media and political leaders. These consultations revealed that a cultural ‘divide’ is being felt in both communities, and although many grassroots programs are being developed with the aim of building bridges across this divide they are somewhat ad hoc and it is unclear how influential they are on improving Muslim and non-Muslim relations.⁶ Projects such as the IMA would help to reduce this cultural divide or gap between Muslim and non-Muslim communities, as it is intended to be a vibrant, engaging institution which will provide a long-lasting impact for visitors, and one that they can visit again and again.

Despite the negative media portrayal of Muslims and the numerous assumptions held by many non-Muslim Australians, there are many examples of Muslims making positive contributions to Australian society through art, comedy, inter-faith activities, business and corporate success, educational programs and community services. These positive events are not reported as often in the media and thus go largely unnoticed by both the wider Australian public and Muslims in general. A space was therefore needed where Australian Muslims would be able to have ownership over how they would like to be represented and defined, and where mainstream Australian society could discover an alternative image of Islam and Muslims to that portrayed in the media. Hence, the concept of the first Islamic Museum of Australia was born.



Artist's impression of the planned Islamic Museum of Australia.

The Islamic Museum of Australia

The concept behind the IMA is to present the Australian public with an experiential encounter of Islam and Muslims that they may not otherwise be exposed to. As a not-for-profit foundation established in May 2010, the aims of the IMA as presented in its mission statement are:

The centre will provide educational and cross-cultural experiences and showcase the artistic and cultural heritage of Muslims in Australia and in Muslim societies abroad. It aims to foster community harmony and facilitate an understanding of the values and contributions of Muslims to Australian society.

The most effective way of achieving the aims as outlined in the mission statement was decided to be through presenting visitors with fascinating and beautiful examples of art and architecture, and to demonstrate the diverse cultural and artistic expression of many different groups of Muslims over numerous historical periods. It is hoped to serve an educational purpose in highlighting the historical contributions of Muslims in terms of philosophy, science, and mathematics, as well as Muslim contributions to Australia. It also plans to identify the many correlations between Islam and other world religions, with the aim of challenging the assumption that Islam is a completely different

and foreign religion, and instead has strong connections with the other monotheistic traditions of Judaism and Christianity (as all three religions are classified as Abrahamic faiths).

Although the majority of Muslims in Australia live in New South Wales (Muslim population 168,788 representing 49.6 percent of all Muslims in Australia, the location of the first Islamic museum in Australia has come to be in Victoria (Muslim population 109,369 representing 32.1 percent).⁷ This is because of a number of reasons. First, there are an inordinate number of young, professional, Australian-born and raised Muslims from amongst the various Muslim communities in Melbourne who are effectively interacting with the wider society, and among these are a large number of Muslims skilled in various artistic and creative pursuits.⁸ Second, the establishment of similar ventures such as the Chinese Museum in the central business district, the Jewish Museum in St Kilda and the Museo Italiano in Carlton⁹ indicates that the City of Melbourne recognises the value of community and cultural institutions and celebrates the diversity and history of other communities. Third, the multicultural policies affirmed by the State Government in Victoria since 1999 signify a welcoming environment where different cultures and religions are appreciated and protected from discrimination and this has helped to engage young Muslims in mainstream society activities.¹⁰

Australian-raised and Professional

The group of people who make up the IMA team symbolise a new and exciting era of Muslim community leadership. The IMA Board of Directors is of particular note as it comprises six young Australian-raised Muslims who represent various areas of expertise. The six directors are: Ms Maysaa Fahour (Chairperson), Mr Moustafa Fahour (former Division Director, Macquarie Group), Mrs Sherene Hassan (Cross-cultural trainer), Mrs Dionnie Fahour (Arts patron), Mr Asad Ansari (Director, Deloitte) and myself (a PhD candidate, The University of Melbourne). In addition to the Board of Directors, the IMA team includes an Advisory Board and an Art Advisory Panel. The advisory board includes Dr Ahmed Hassan (presenter and co-founder of Salam Café), Mr Imran Lum (Associate Director, National Australia Bank), Dr Hass Dellal (Executive Director, Australian Multicultural Foundation), Ms Padmini Sebastian (Manager, Immigration Museum) and Mr Talal Yassine (Founder of Crescent Wealth). The Art Advisory Panel includes Associate Professor Phillip George (College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales), Dr Les Morgan (Fine Arts, RMIT University), and Ms Nur Shkemi (Arts Officer, Islamic Council of Victoria and Art Director, IMA). The appointment of Mr Ahmed Fahour (CEO, Australia Post) as the IMA Patron provides a well-known and reputable public face for the IMA as a whole.

Another important aspect that makes the IMA unique among Muslim community organisations (aside from those providing services specifically for Muslim women) is that the majority of the IMA board is female, with four out of the six directors women. In the formative years of Muslim settlement from the 1970s onwards, most Muslim community

organisations were male-dominated, with mosques and voluntary associations acting for the most part as 'male clubs'.¹¹ Women's involvement in these organisations tended to be limited to welfare and charitable activities relating to women and families, rather than contributing through positions of public power such as membership of managing committees. It is only over the last decade that this has changed with a number of Muslim women being appointed to peak Muslim representative bodies of the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC) at the national level, as well as state Islamic Councils that serve as state-based Muslim representative bodies.¹² Women are now featuring in more management positions in various Muslim community organisations that provide a variety of services beyond the focus on women, including inter-faith events, youth programs, social services and more. This has been supported in part by numerous leadership programs targeting young Muslim women such as the Muslim Women's Leadership Training Program organised by the Australian Multicultural Foundation.¹³ Such programs have positively contributed to Muslim women's involvement in Muslim and non-Muslim organisations.

Community Support

A promising sign that the IMA is destined for success is the level of support received not only from within the Muslim community, but most importantly, from various sections of the wider Australian society. Support from the Muslim community has been expressed in numerous forms, including financially and in-kind. Funds raised from the Muslim community made it possible to purchase a warehouse property in Thornbury, thus overcoming the hurdle of finding and securing a location, one that significantly sets back many other community projects.

Federal and state politicians, council members, business and corporate representatives, artists and Islamic art specialists, local residents and representatives of similar cultural institutions have all expressed overwhelmingly positive sentiments towards the founding of this centre, in addition to significant international support from foreign dignitaries. At the Inaugural Gala Dinner in July 2011, the Hon. Kevin Rudd spoke via video message, noting that the worthwhile project had caught the attention of foreign ministers from various Muslim countries including Turkey and Senegal.¹⁴ Also speaking at the event and giving his support was Professor Stefano Carboni, Director of the Art Gallery of Western Australia with years of experience in Islamic art, who was also keynote speaker at the conference associated with the 'Love and Devotion: from Persia and beyond'¹⁵ exhibition at the State Library of Victoria. In addition, the Minister for Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship, Nicholas Kotsiras, welcomed the initiative and expressed his support for the project saying:

It will educate all Victorians on the complexity and diversity of Muslim identities. It will dispel myths and misconceptions, and work towards creating an understanding, compassionate and cohesive society. It is a noble vision; it is a worthy vision.¹⁶

As a sign of their support, at the Gala Dinner the Victorian Government pledged \$500,000 towards the project, adding to the \$100,000 raised from the event night. Local council support has likewise been forthcoming, with Moreland City Council and the Federal Labor Member for Batman, Martin Ferguson MP, providing letters of support towards the project.¹⁷ The IMA has also received letters of support from the former Attorney-General, the Hon. Robert McLelland MP and the National Centre for Excellence in Islamic Studies (NCEIS).

This presents a new and optimistic chapter in the history of Muslim relations with mainstream Australia, as historically the establishment of Muslim institutions in Australia has been met with opposition and antagonism.¹⁸ The early Muslim institutions tended to comprise of mosques, which functioned not only as places for communal worship but also for community social gatherings and events such as weddings and funerals. As Muslim communities grew, schools and community centres became the next focal point. The establishment of these types of institutions are not particularly unique to Muslim communities, as other religious communities migrating to Australia have also tended to follow such a progression in terms of building community institutions, with such institutions forming part of the religious settlement process, whereby 'a religion migrates to a place and is incorporated into its religious economy'.¹⁹ These institutions play an important role in maintaining the cultural and religious identity of many different communities. While they arguably contribute to the multicultural nature of Australian society, they can, however, be viewed by mainstream Australian society as designated spaces that are open only to members of that particular religious community, and not welcoming spaces for all. This is particularly the case with many Muslim institutions such as mosques and schools, as the exterior design of their buildings is often 'postcard architecture' through adopting the style of a particular foreign region. Although impressive in stature, these architectural styles can often create imposing barriers, preventing easy approach from non-Muslims who may wish to discover more about Islam and Muslims.²⁰

Structure and Facilities of the Islamic Museum of Australia

Apart from the internal gallery content of contemporary Islamic museums, their architectural design can also serve an important function in presenting a welcoming image to the wider community. In his discussion on the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA) in Doha, Qatar, Ali Alraouf observes that museums as cultural facilities serve an important purpose in redrawing and removing boundaries between people and places.²¹ In his assessment, the MIA is achieving this through the unique urban design of the building by renowned architect I. M. Pei, which is inspired by the architecture and geometric poetry of the Ibn Tulun Mosque in Cairo, yet incorporates modern elements such as a 45-metre 'glass curtain wall' which offers panoramic views of Doha from all five floors of the atrium, making visitors feel welcome within while still connected to the outside world.

The architects at Desypher, the firm appointed to oversee the design of the IMA, sought to create a building that represented a fusion of Islamic and Australian icons, drawing upon their creative expertise to utilise different Islamic icons to the more standard, recognisable elements of the crescent and star, or even domes and minarets. Even the colour of the front façade is a unique desert-red to signify the Australian environment.

The first thing set out to be achieved was to challenge visitors' perception of what and how an Australian Islamic Museum should be. It appears with few iconic Islamic elements – rather the façade is an austere composition of rusted steel panels and woven mesh.²²

The overall design of the IMA as envisaged by Desypher is influenced by the idea of an 'Islamic Exploratorium', where interactive and participatory experiences create an atmosphere of awareness and understanding through a range of environments, programs and tools that will assist visitors to nurture their curiosity about Islam and Muslims in general.²³

Internally, the IMA will comprise four permanent galleries: Islamic beliefs and practices; Islamic contributions to civilisation; Islamic art and architecture; and Australian Muslim history. Through these four galleries, it is hoped visitors will gain a deeper appreciation of Islam as a religion and understand the rich cultural diversity amongst Muslims. The galleries hope to take the visitor beyond current stereotypes, express the beauty and complexity of Islamic art and Muslim culture and demonstrate a strong sense of community and family life.

Other important features of the IMA designed to encourage visitor interaction include temporary exhibition spaces for local and international visiting exhibitions, a multi-use space, workshop spaces and a landscaped garden at the rear of the building with café facilities. Temporary exhibition spaces add a dynamic element to the IMA by focusing on particular issues and contemporary topics that are not possible in the permanent exhibits, and the regular changeover of these exhibits will encourage visitors to return again and again. The multi-use space can be used to serve a variety of purposes: business and community groups may wish to hold seminars or activities, or the space could be set up for film screenings, performances, and fundraising events. Workshop spaces are envisaged to provide various activities for school and community groups, such as calligraphy and other artistic classes. The landscaped garden and accompanying café will serve as a place of relaxation and enjoyment, with numerous planned working installations – such as a water clock and a sundial that involves the visitor as the central dial – so as to continue the educational experience in a tranquil setting.

Indeed, it is through conducting various public programs in addition to providing exhibitions that museums can promote positive inter-cultural and inter-faith relations and create an interactive community space.²⁴ The IMA sees engaging with outside communities, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, corporate or non-profit, as essential in

developing and maintaining strong community relations, and providing all community groups with a sense of connection to the IMA and its ongoing endeavours.

The question remains, however: how will displays of Islamic art and Muslim heritage break down barriers between Muslims and mainstream Australian society and promote greater understanding of Islam and Muslims in Australia? The following sections will explore how the establishment of the IMA has the potential capability to achieve such a challenging goal, through a discussion structured around the threefold motto of the IMA: Art – Heritage – Discovery.

Art

In the Islamic art and architecture gallery, the IMA will showcase historical as well as original art pieces, showing the diversity of artistic expression and architectural styles spanning many continents over fourteen centuries. These will include unique, valuable and intricate pieces of art, calligraphy, textiles, mosaics and other crafts sourced from around the Muslim world. It is hoped that visitors will discover the rich art and architecture that represent the legacies of the influential Muslim civilisations and empires, including that of the Ummayyads (Syria), the Abbasids (Iraq), the Andalusians (Spain), the Mughals (India), the Fatimids (Egypt), the Saffavids (Persia) and the Ottomans (Turkey). In line with its objectives, the IMA seeks to offer more than just historical Islamic arts, hence it will also feature artworks by contemporary Muslims, exhibiting works by Australian as well as international Muslim artists.

There are many different scholarly opinions about what exactly defines various examples of art and architecture as distinctly ‘Islamic’, but there is general consensus that it is incorrect to talk of a single form of Islamic artistic expression.²⁵ For the purposes of this article, the common element that binds various types of art and architecture together as sharing a common ‘Islamic’ thread is the openness of early Muslim artists, craftsmen and architects to new artistic styles and techniques from other cultures. This openness resulted in inter-cultural fusions between the different cultures and civilisations at various times, with the creativity and diversity apparent in historic examples of Islamic art and architecture as testaments to the success of such fusions.

The rapid spread of Islam over a vast geographical area within the first 100 years of its inception brought Islamic concepts in contact with different cultural forms of art and architecture, creating meeting-points between different cultural and civilisational styles. The Dome of the Rock is a prime example of such a meeting-point, in this case between Byzantine and Islamic art. Built between 688 and 692 C.E. and located in Jerusalem, this is ‘the most ancient Muslim monument still surviving in a state of complete preservation.’²⁶ This sacred monument is somewhat unique in Islamic architecture due to the central cupola, which has much in common with Byzantine sanctuaries. The arrangement of pillars around the Rock itself in a star-shaped polygon are further examples of a Byzantine legacy, which in turn has its origins in Platonic and the eight-pointed polygon has since played a fundamental role in architectural art

as well as in decorative motifs in other places in the Muslim world.²⁷ The architectural and decorative elements found within the Dome of the Rock, therefore, represent quite strikingly the meeting-point between two great civilisations, as the Platonic influence on Byzantine art provides ‘a certain aspect of contemplative wisdom, which integrates quite naturally with the Islamic perspective oriented on the unity of God, both transcendent and immanent.’²⁸ Examples such as these provide opportunities to challenge commonly held assumptions of Muslims as ‘anti-Western’ and ‘insular’.

Artistic expressions of various cultures and civilisations through art and architecture constitute media that demonstrate inter-cultural communication and creative exchange. Many prestigious museums and art galleries in the Western world have recognised the potential of Islamic art in presenting an image of Islam and Muslims in a positive light through exhibitions that highlight the diversity and sophistication of Islamic art during medieval times. The collection and display of Islamic artworks and artefacts have taken place since the times of European colonialism, with the British Museum including a few Islamic art items among its displays at the time of its public opening in 1759.²⁹ However, there has been an upsurge in displays of Islamic art particularly since the events of 9/11. In 2006, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London refurbished the gallery housing their Islamic art collection, the \$9.8 million cost made possible through the generous donation of Mohammed Jameel. The new display gallery – renamed the Jameel Gallery of Islamic Art – aims to present an image of the artistic sophistication of Muslims to counteract the radical stereotypes of Islam prevalent in the media, hoping to promote greater understanding between the Judeo-Christian and Muslim worlds.³⁰

In Australia, a number of museums, art galleries and related institutions are showing a similar interest in exhibiting Islamic art to educate the Australian public about the vast cultural heritage of Muslims and Islam. One such exhibition entitled ‘Crescent Moon: Islamic art and civilisation in Southeast Asia’ was hosted in 2006 by the National Gallery of Australia in partnership with the Art Gallery of South Australia in Adelaide. This collection of a wide variety of media revealed the unique developments in the arts of Islamic Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, as well as the Muslim communities of Thailand, Burma, Cambodia and Vietnam,³¹ demonstrating the diverse expressions of Islamic art in Australia’s neighbouring Muslim countries. The then Premier of South Australia, the Hon. Mike Rann, referred to the valuable role that exhibitions such as Crescent Moon serve in bringing communities together: ‘... there is no doubt that art is powerfully influential and can play a unique role in encouraging cultural understanding and helping to bring about practical reconciliation.’³² In his opinion, such exhibitions are particularly relevant in nurturing greater understanding between Muslim and non-Muslim Australians. This level of support indicates that politicians are aware of the difficult situation that Muslim Australians are facing in terms of public perception, and that presenting alternative images of Muslims and Islam can go some way towards achieving harmony between different communities.

The most impressive exhibition of Islamic art in Australia has been the ‘Arts of

Islam' collection hosted in 2007 by the Art Gallery of NSW, showcasing 350 pieces of Professor Nasser David Khalili's personal collection, which encompasses over 20,000 items of Islamic art. This exhibition contained beautifully crafted examples of religious items relating to worship, such as prayer rugs and Qur'ans (including one transcribed by a woman), as well as non-religious items including an astrolabe, lacquerware, ceramics, jewellery and even a gold saddle.³³ In a media interview, Edmund Capon, director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, expressed his hope that through experiencing the beauty of the displays, the curiosity of visitors would translate into a deeper understanding of Islam, even from those items that do not have overt religious significance: 'People can look at a page from a 9th or 10th-century Qur'an and they won't have a clue what it's saying', he said. 'But as an object of aesthetic beauty it's immediately establishing a rapport and an appreciation.'³⁴ Indeed, the Qur'an – the collection of sacred verses that Muslims believe is the transcribed revelation from God to Prophet Muhammad – has many aspects of aesthetic beauty that both Muslims and non-Muslims are able to appreciate, from the intricate calligraphy in written form to the melodic sounds of the Qur'an in recitation. Ziauddin Sardar, who considers himself a 'rational sceptic', asserts that Muslims innately have a natural love of music through constantly hearing the Qur'an, which to him constitutes a form of 'sacred music'.³⁵

More and more new exhibitions on Islamic art are making their way to Australia. The State Library of Victoria's 2012 'Love and Devotion: Persia and beyond' exhibition featured nearly seventy rare Persian, Mughal Indian and Ottoman Turkish illustrated manuscripts and miniatures from the Bodleian Libraries of the University of Oxford.³⁶ 'Love and Devotion' also featured rare editions of European literature, travel books and maps from the State Library's own collections. Exhibitions of such high calibre as these indicate that Australian society is becoming more receptive to attending and supporting displays of Islamic art, and in the process, perhaps more open to changing their perceptions about Islam and Muslims.

The IMA's art spaces will provide ideal venues to host works by contemporary Muslim artists. New and exciting Australian Muslim artists are representative of a local contemporary art scene producing unique artwork and successful annual exhibitions. One such example was the 'You Am I' exhibition, held over February-March 2012 at the Hume Global Learning Centre in Pascoe Vale, Victoria, and organised by Nur Shkemi, a member of IMA's art advisory panel and the Art Director of IMA. The IMA will provide an ideal venue to host exhibitions of such innovative artistic works as well as provide community access through workshops specialising in calligraphy, art and craft.

The IMA art galleries will also be used to celebrate the increasing number of Australian Muslim artists who are receiving accolades in their respective fields. A relevant example is in the 2011 Blake Prize for religious art, where two out of three awards for visual art were won by Muslim artists. Khaled Sabsabi was the winner of the 2011 Blake Prize for his video entitled 'Naqshbandi Greenacre Engagement', while the Blake Prize for Human Justice was awarded to Abdul Abdullah for his powerful photographic work



'Mohammedan Mosque', Shepparton, Vic. [ca. late 1950s].
Rose Stereograph Postcard, H32492/8988.

entitled 'Them and Us'.³⁷ The IMA hopes that through providing a space to display and highlight the achievements of these talented artists, more young Muslims will be encouraged to develop their artistic skills and contribute artworks of their own.

Heritage

In the Islamic Contributions to Civilisations gallery, visitors will be introduced to the significant scientific and cultural contributions made by Muslim scholars during the Islamic Golden Age during the time of the Dark Ages in Europe. They will experience interactive displays presenting the remarkable inventions and discoveries that helped to shape European culture, the Renaissance and, ultimately, our modern world. Displays will include discoveries and contributions by Muslims in the fields of mathematics, medicine, astronomy, engineering, optics, chemistry, language, literature and learning in general. For example, the al-Azhar university, the world's first university established in the 10th century in Cairo. One of these notable Muslims include Ibn Sina (also known as Avicenna), who wrote the Canon of Medicine that constituted the main medical textbook in Europe for 700 years. Others include al-Zahrawi who designed hundreds of surgical instruments, the designs of which form the basis of many contemporary instruments used by surgeons today, and the father of optics, Ibn al-Haitham, who invented the pinhole camera.

The content of this gallery takes its inspiration from, and will share many similarities to, the award-winning exhibition '1001 Inventions: Discover the Muslim heritage in our world', which has toured New York, London and Istanbul, and has recently been showing in Los Angeles and Abu Dhabi.³⁸ Designed to demonstrate the impact of discoveries and inventions made by Muslim civilisations, this exhibition has helped to enlighten many visitors about the inter-cultural exchange existing in medieval times between Muslims and other cultures and faiths, and the contribution of Muslim scholars to the European Renaissance by making significant works of Greek and Roman scholars available to European scholars after their Dark Ages.

The Australian Muslim History gallery at IMA presents Australian Muslims with the opportunity to archive, preserve and share their history in this country. Exhibits will chronicle the fascinating and diverse history of Muslims in Australia since before European colonisation and settlement through to the contemporary period. Early Muslims include Macassan fishermen and Malay pearl divers who interacted with Aboriginal tribes in northern Australia from the 1600s. The contribution of the Afghan cameleers should be of particular interest for visitors. They assisted legendary Australian explorers such as Burke and Wills with their dangerous inland journeys of discovery whilst also ferrying supplies and sick patients across the Australian outback and helping build the famous Ghan railway.

Through the efforts of historians and writers, more resources are becoming available about the historical contribution of Muslims to early Australian society. The works of Australian Muslim historians are particularly valuable as they present unique perspectives of Muslim lives that are not often encountered in other publications. One such noteworthy contributor is the award-winning Australian author Hanifa Deen, who has produced a number of books documenting the history of Muslims in Australia,³⁹ and in 2007 compiled the 'Muslim Journeys' content for the National Archives of Australia's Uncommon Lives series.⁴⁰

Seeking to further develop these resources, the IMA recently undertook a project entitled 'Boundless Plains', whereby a team of four led by the IMA founder, Moustafa Fahour, travelled around Australia to create a visual documentary of Muslim history in Australia.⁴¹ Other members of the team included the IMA General Manager, Ashraf Naim, photographer Peter Gould and videographer Jihad Debab. Covering a vast amount of terrain in only a month or so, the 'Boundless Plains' team travelled across Australia, visiting important historical sites such as the earliest constructed mosques in Marree and Adelaide, South Australia and Broken Hill, New South Wales, as well as caves in Northern Australia containing ancient Aboriginal paintings that depict Macassan boats. Other important sites that Muslims contributed significantly to include the Ghan Railway and the Snowy River Hydro Scheme. The team conducted interviews with locals near the sites who related family stories or their own experience about interacting with these different groups of Muslims, as well as locals of Muslim heritage, in addition to a number of prominent academics. These sites and interviews are important as they



Women at prayer, Preston Mosque, 1993.
Photo by Viva Gibb, H98.161/13.

challenge a number of the aforementioned contemporary assumptions about Muslims in Australia: historical structures and cave paintings are evidence that the Muslim presence in Australia predates European contact, which challenges the ‘foreign’ and ‘newly-arrived’ assumptions; and the active contributions to the broader society of Muslims who migrated to Australia over the past century. The IMA has received requests from several schools across Australia to view the documentary, as well as interest from SBS and ABC to air it on their television networks. In addition to the documentary, the IMA will also produce an accompanying photographic book due for release in 2012.

The contributions and achievements of contemporary Australian Muslims is another vital aspect of this gallery. A diverse range of Australian Muslim authors, comedians, media personalities and politicians have written books, produced and

hosted television shows and led interesting lives which highlight the Australian Muslim experience. This gallery will also profile a number of prominent Australian Muslim sports stars and business identities such as Ahmed Fahour, John Ilhan, Miriam Silva, footballer Hazem El Masri and cricketer Uthman Khawaja. It will also include notable individuals in various fields who have contributed in unique ways to the betterment of society, both within their own Muslim community and to Australian society at large. One such project was the publication in 2009 by the Australian Government Department of Immigration and Citizenship of 'The Australian Journey – Muslim communities' which featured successful Muslims across a variety of occupations and presents their thoughts about what it means to be a Muslim and Australian in today's society.⁴²

Discovery

In the Islamic Beliefs and Practices gallery, visitors will discover the core beliefs and practices that are shared across cultures and ethnicities worldwide. These include the five pillars of Islam that outline the five main forms of worship: 1) *Shahadah*, the proclamation of faith in God and Muhammad as His Messenger; 2) *Salat*, the ritual prayer of Muslims which is performed five times daily in a set form; 3) *Zakat*, an annual payment of 2.5% of one's savings designated for charitable purposes; 4) *Sawm*, fasting from pre-dawn to dusk during the lunar month of Ramadan, where Muslims refrain from food and drink, and seek personal betterment; and 5) *Hajj*, the holy pilgrimage to cities in Saudi Arabia including Makkah,⁴³ that is obligatory only once in a lifetime for financially-able adult Muslims.

In addition, this gallery will present information about the six articles of faith, which will help dispel the myth that Islam is a foreign religion by highlighting the many shared Prophets, beliefs and teachings with other Judeo-Christian traditions. These six articles of faith include: 1) One God; 2) Angels, such as Gabriel; 3) Books, referring to previous revelations including the Torah, Psalms and the Gospel as well as the Qur'an; 4) Prophets, from Adam through to Noah, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad; 5) Day of Judgement, which includes belief in Heaven and Hell; and 6) *Qadr*, the divine predestination.

The main aim of presenting these core beliefs and practices is to demonstrate that they represent the common beliefs and practices shared by Muslims worldwide, and act as a link as they are essentially the same across different cultures and ethnicities. In addition to highlighting these essential unifying beliefs and practices, it is also important to show that there is diversity in Islam, through exploring the many social practices that are expressed differently according to local culture and custom. These include the types of clothes worn by different groups of Muslims, and ways of commemorating significant events such as births, marriages, deaths and religious festivals. This is hoped to challenge the assumption of Muslims as 'homogenous' by showing that Islam is practised in many diverse ways and is adapted by local cultures in ways that allow them to express their own identity while still sharing similar beliefs to Muslims of other cultures.

While all visitors will benefit from learning about these core tenets of Islam, school students are a particularly important group. Through her work with the Islamic Council of Victoria, Sherene Hassan, one of the board members of the IMA, has presented to more than 700 primary and secondary school students over the past 10 years. In 2007 she was listed in the *Age* Melbourne Magazine's 'Top 100 Most Influential People (Society)' for her outstanding work in cross-cultural and educational presentations. Given that most Islamic centres and mosques in Melbourne are not able to cater for the high demand from school groups wishing to learn more about Islam and Muslims, the IMA will play a key role in meeting this demand for educational tours. Through providing a holistic interactive and visual experience that covers not only the basic beliefs and practices but also art and heritage, it is hoped that these school groups will be able to develop new perspectives of Islam and Muslims.

Conclusion

Research in this area suggests that Muslims in Australia are generally perceived as a minority cultural community that does not fit in with mainstream Australian society, due to cultural and religious incongruity. This perception has mainly arisen as a result of media coverage of events involving Muslims, particularly over the past decade.

The first Islamic Museum of Australia aims to contribute to social cohesion and the multicultural landscape, and in doing so will also play an active role in reducing the cultural gap between mainstream Australian society and Muslims who live in Australia, as many are Australian-born and raised and wish to engage and contribute positively to mainstream society. Through the various exhibits and facilities that will be provided for the benefit of all visitors, the IMA has the potential – whether intended or not – to challenge the numerous assumptions that currently exist about Muslims and Islam in Australia. It seeks to demonstrate that Muslims and Islam are diverse rather than homogenous, are familiar rather than foreign, are established rather than newly-arrived, and are open-minded and accepting of Western ideas rather than insular and anti-Western. Rather than being positioned as opposite to mainstream Australian society and the Western world in general, the IMA hopes that the perception of Muslims and Islam will change from being misunderstood to being a valuable part of society, like other religions and cultures should ideally be.

* The IMA received \$1.5 million in the 2012 Federal Budget for capital works. See Katrina Strickland, 'Islamic Museum gets \$1.5m in budget', *Australian Financial Review*, 10 May 2012, http://afr.com/p/national/arts_saleroom/islamic_museum_gets_in_budget_UbQjI2Oq16wpYUIjf0Wu3N