



# Islamic Heritage in Qatar: Building a Myth

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## **Islamic Heritage in Qatar: Building a Myth**

### **Introduction**

The concept of heritage in Qatar came into being in the 1970s, following the country's independence in 1971 and the foundation of a nation-state. Based on the European model of modernity, this willingness to create a heritage of its own led to the opening of a National Museum in 1975. After his coup d'état in 1995, the former Emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, instituted the development of a cultural program in the country to establish Qatar as a major international cultural centre. This perspective was reaffirmed through the creation in 2008 of the Qatar National Vision 2030 project which aims to 'preserve Qatar's national heritage and enhance Arab and Islamic values and identity'. The creation of a museum solely dedicated to Islamic art in 2008 is part of this process, beside the opening of the Mathaf, dedicated to modern and contemporary Arab art in 2010 and the refurbishment of the National Museum in 2018. Two official reasons have been underlined to explain the opening of the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA). First, the economy and the rapid development of Qatar being based on the oil and gas exploitation, which will be in the long term, used up, the country tried to reinvent its economy, through the investments in museums, but also international universities and sport, to become a cultural hub in the region and attract tourists. Secondly, in the growing context of Islamophobia, MIA is used as a bulwark by the government 'to raise the global debate about the nature and principles of Islamic civilization and to alter the perceived images of that civilization'. However, beyond this scope, based on Benedict Anderson's theory of the role of the museum in building national imagination and Roland Barthes' mythology's theory I would like to argue that MIA aims to state the belonging of Qatar to the Islamic world and its heritage through the shaping of a myth. This mythology asserts the transnational identity of the country.

This paper is based on my museographic analysis ranging from the architecture of the building and the scenography of the works to the mediation around them. In addition to my evaluations of the museum space, I conducted semi-structured interviews with different actors of the museum to understand their decisions. These data were collected during my doctoral field research in 2019 and 2021.

### **Museum: shaping the myth of national identity**

Drawing from Ferdinand de Saussure's theory on semiology, in *Mythologies*, Barthes demonstrated that a myth is a language, and as such a mode of signification. For Saussure, the linguistic sign, the word, consists of the double articulation signifier and signified (meaning conveyed by the sign). For Barthes, in the mythological sign (an image or an object), a third term is added to the relationship between the signifier and the signified, the signification. He argued that the connection between both is an act of signification. The signifier has already a signification, but the myth transformed it in an empty form, to create a new signification. This connection

becomes over time naturalized and the signification universal, and so the language of myth takes over reality to become the reality. Barthes' perception of myth applied also to museum, the museum being a system of communication delivering a message through the display of objects. As such, the linguist Louise Ravelli developed the concept of 'museum-as-text' in arguing that the museum draws on a variety of semiotic resources, like physical with the practice of design and display, discursive with community involvement and government directives, and written with museum's texts. Drawing from Barthes' myth theory and Ravelli's concept of 'museum-as-text', I argue that the museum is a place where myth can be formed.

Indeed, museums express signification through the lens of the presentation of objects. Their ways of being displayed, the selection of the objects, the labels giving sense to them, the scenography designing the display, and the architecture surrounding the objects, every single detail within the museum is meaningful. This signification delivered by the museum changed over time, such as the myth, which is not permanent, because it reflects a moment in society. The myth is created, because the museum displays a story, a historical one or artistic one, that is presented as permanent and the unique reality, in highlighting one layer of meaning of the objects.

Since its inception at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe, the museum has been at the heart of the construction of the modern nation-state, beginning with the Louvre and its creation after the French revolution and the birth of the French Republic. The Louvre symbolized the Republic in displaying and giving access to each citizen to the nationalized collections of the former royal family, of the nobles and the Church. The national museum was supposed to gather citizens around a new myth, the national identity of the French Republic. The Louvre symbolized what Benedict Anderson called an 'imagined community'. In his text, he defined this concept of a modern nation as an 'imagined community', because it is a construction to gather people at a moment when 'Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the hierarchical dynastic realm' and order. The Louvre was opened to the public in that perspective, when France was searching for a new political structure and foundation able to gather people, after being a monarchy during centuries. In the context of Qatar, the same process can be seen. Indeed, being a new modern nation-state looking also for a common identity, the sudden buildings of these different museums reflect the willing of constructing a community, which I will argue in the following is imagined, because manufactured through the belonging to a mythological past.

### **A museum built from a connoisseur perspective?**

According to the museum discourse through a recent temporary exhibition, *A Falcon's Eye: Tribute to Sheikh Saoud Al Thani*, the MIA collection, among other Qatar Museum's collection, has been created by the Sheikh Saoud Al Thani. The exhibition highlighted the role of Saoud in the founding of Qatar Museum's collections, as a man of taste, presenting him at the image of the 19<sup>th</sup> century connoisseur: '(he) was so influential in the constitution of collections for Qatar Museums and the State of Qatar in general', 'a collector of crucial importance to Qatar Museums', 'he laid the foundations of the major collections', 'his collecting vision', 'a real passion and eyes for arts and culture'.

The MIA collection has been built *ex nihilo* by Sheikh Saoud between 1995 and 2000s at the request of his cousin, the former Emir, Sheikh Hamad. Saoud was appointed president of the National Council for Cultures, Arts and Heritage to pursue this quest of gathering objects in the

purpose of building a collection and then a museum dedicated to Islamic art. So, the museum is not exhibiting Saoud's personal collection, but the State's collection gathered by Saoud, as a representant of the State. Saoud has been chosen by his cousin for this task, because he was already a collector and passionate about art. However, behind the figure of the Sheikh as art amateur, drawn in the exhibition, there is the figure of Guy Bennett, a former Christie's Islamic art expert and dealer, who has been appointed as Qatar Museum's director of collection and acquisition. With Bennett's support, the collection has been built on the western art market mostly at Christie's and Sotheby's. Part of the collection is also from former private collections. Thus, the collection reflects mainly what was on the art market at that moment, and considered by the experts as the most beautiful, valuable objects and most representative of what could define 'Islamic art'.

A first layer of the myth is created through the figure of the father of the collection. The exhibition dedicated to Sheikh Saoud is doubly the construction of a mythology. Before this exhibition, the role of the Sheikh was known, but not particularly highlighted by the museum. There was no mention on the website of the museum and even within the museum's galleries regarding the formation of the collection. This can be explained by the royal disgrace which affected the Sheikh from 2005. He was accused to have amassed a personal collection with the state money when he was supposed to collect for the state. After that, he was put beside until his death. Dedicating an entire temporary exhibition within MIA to the Sheikh as a *tribute* to his collector's work, also shows a change of perspective by the state itself regarding his person. The state supports or even causes the change of his image. Through this myth of a father, a history is created, asserting that the presence of this Islamic art collection is not the fruit of the state, but the result of one of its citizen's passions presented as 'a modern Renaissance man of the Arab world'. Thus, the collection itself has a proper history, putting in the shadow the influence of the state within the formation of the collection and the museum.

The lack of collection's history has been hidden through the choice of display. Following, Western presentation of Islamic art since Munich 1910 exhibition, *Masterpieces of Muhammedan Art*, the beauty of the objects is highlighted, through the aesthetization of the collection. Indeed, the objects are presented in a white cube. Labels give very restrictive information on each object: name, materials, period of production, geographical origin. Objects are either isolated in a solo showcase in the centre of the room, or exhibited in group, but with space between each object. An atmosphere of preciousness is created, through the solely lighting of the objects contrasting with the darkness of the room.

This choice of display is linked to the character of the collection itself. Indeed, Oliver Watson, former director of MIA, wrote in the museum's collection catalog that the collection is not meant to represent the entire Islamic art production, but to highlight 'masterpieces'. The process of collecting on the art market wasn't as such based on the taste of the collector, but on the value of the object, an object, which could be labeled as 'masterpiece'. According to Hans Belting, the term was used to designate an ideal of art, the highest form of artistic creation. For him, the concept of 'masterpiece' became normalized through the rise of museum, the musealization of objects gave them this status. Eva Troelenberg in her analysis of the 1910 Munich exhibition argued that after this exhibition it became canonical to display Islamic art in an 'unhistorical' and 'unethnographical' approach. As such, objects are identified as art.

This double decontextualization, from the way of collecting and from the display, helped to the construction of the myth. The display allowing the creation of the myth, that this, those objects, is Islamic art.

### **A transcultural architecture: ‘Arab’, ‘Islamic’ and ‘Modernism’**

The architecture of MIA has been widely analyzed and also described by his creator. I.M. Pei stated knowing nothing about Islamic art and architecture, he had to travel around the Arab world to get inspired for the purpose of constructing the building. For the building skeleton, he draws his inspiration from the fountain of the mosque of Ahmad Ibn Tulun (876-879) in Cairo, which is one of the oldest mosques known today. Also, the architectural vocabulary refers to Islamic art tradition. For example, the left courtyard, surrounding the main building, has a row of arches, also a typical element of the Islamic architecture, which can be found for example in the Umayyad architecture such as at the Cordoba’s Mosque-Cathedral or at the Anjar palace in Lebanon. Inside the building, this vocabulary is also present. One of the most visible reference to Islamic art vocabulary is the geometric pattern on the ground in the atrium reminding the mosaics of the Alhambra. Also in the atrium, a great window referred by its form and position to the *mihrab*, the niche in mosque’s wall indicating the direction of the Mecca. For Karen Exell, ‘the rhetoric of fusing the traditional and the modern represents the region’s approach to modernity, an agenda of retaining cultural identity in balance with aspects of a more secular modernity’. Pei is not copying Islamic architecture but capturing elements of western modern architecture and Islamic architecture to emulate his own architecture. The transcultural vocabulary of the architecture inscribed Pei’s building within the Qatari architectural movement, but also widely in the Gulf, to create a contemporary Islamic architecture. Here, Pei’s architecture is also a tool to build a myth of the belonging of the country to Islamic artistic heritage. In making references to the ‘Islamic’ architecture tradition from different regions and periods in the Arab world, Pei states that Islamic architecture is a ‘global’ heritage, which as such belongs to Qatar and to the world.

### **Naming the myth**

The myth is stated from the origin in the name of the museum itself, Museum of Islamic Art. The name witnesses the aim of anchoring the country within a history, a global culture, such as the global Islamic heritage. The use of the name ‘Islamic art’ is problematic for museums and in the research. Since almost its creation, the field of Islamic art is struggling with its designation. This debate has been increased since the beginning of the century and after 9/11, especially within western museums leading to the MET’s choice to not entitle their gallery as ‘Islamic’. In this context, Doha’s choice bears a powerful meaning. For Tim Stanley, Islamic art curator at the V&A, ‘in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, it (Islamic art) gained new legitimacy as part of the intellectual apparatus of self-consciously Islamic states’. Thus, by choosing this name, despite the debate around it, the Qatari government wants to settle the country as one of the heirs of this Islamic great history and culture. This myth is made not only for Qataris but also for worldwide vision of the country. Coming back to the architecture, the choice of Pei is symbolic of this desire to register the country for international community within the Islamic global history. Indeed, Pei wasn’t supposed to be the architect of the museum. Another architect, Rasem Badran, won the competition, and Pei didn’t even participate to the competition. The father Emir requested him to be the architect. The choice of Pei is symbolic of the status given to the museum by the Emir himself, and as such within the

state of Qatar, because Pei is not only a worldwide famous architect, but he is also the creator of the Louvre's Pyramid. The Louvre, being the biggest and most famous museum in the world, symbol of the creation of the French Republic.

## **Conclusion**

At each level, from the inception of the collection and the choice of the architect to the presentation of the objects, the museum has been staged to shape a mythological past to Qatar. Why is it a myth? Qatar is a very young nation-state looking for its own identity. However, the human presence on his soil is very old, because artifacts from the Ubaid period (c. 6500-3800 BC) have been found on its territory. However, as the National Museum shows Qataris were until the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bedouins. As such, their material culture is not identified as Islamic art, but as ethnographic material, which can be questioned. As we already mentioned, Islamic objects are identified as art, underlining the fact that it is beautiful objects with an artistic value. Objects defined as such were produced mainly in the court context. Also, Islamic art, by its old definition – which today is debated – is defined as being produced between the 7<sup>th</sup> until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. MIA follows this established definition in its exhibition. Modern and contemporary artworks can be found in another museum, Mathaf. As such, it seems impossible that MIA exhibits Qatar's cultural heritage. Thus, the collection presents no objects produced on Qatar soil or even in the Gulf. Through different interviews in 2019 and 2021, many members of the museum's staff at different levels (curators, director, and head of exhibitions) confirmed the fact that Qataris did not feel attracted by the museum due in part to the lack of connection with their own history, identity and culture. One of the first reason raised by them was the absence of objects from Qatar on the contrary to the recently refurbished National Museum, which since its opening has been attracting much more Qataris than its neighbor, MIA. The building and separation between the 1975 and then 2018 refurbished National Museum, the 2008 MIA and the 2010 Mathaf witnesses Qatar's strategy in presenting different layers of identity. The National Museum presents material cultures from Qatar's territory, as such defending a national (local) identity based on the principle of 19<sup>th</sup> century idea of nation-state and identity. The Mathaf defends the anchor of Qatar within a regional Arab identity. When, MIA, in addressing Islamic art definition as a unified civilization drawing from different periods and geographical areas defends the belonging to a global identity, the Islamic one. Through MIA, Qatar registered itself within an identity beyond the nation defined as nation-state. It challenged the idea of identity based on the 19<sup>th</sup> century European model, that an identity is defined by its territory. Qatar defends the belonging to a transnational identity which is shaped through the museum.