



# MUSEUM WITH A MISSION

Can art help bridge the Western/Muslim divide?

STORY BY INGRID SAPONA

When the Aga Khan Museum opened last September in Toronto, articles lauded the exquisite architecture of the new building, the more than 1,000 objects in the collection, and the fact that it's the first museum in North America dedicated to Islamic art. But a significant number of articles also focused on comments by the Aga Khan, the spiritual leader of the Ismaili Muslims, who said he hopes the museum will provide a bridge for healing the escalating division between the East and West.

The Aga Khan's brother, Prince Amyn Aga Khan, expressed similar hopes. At the grand opening, he described the role he wants the museum to play:

"All across the planet ... the forces

of globalization are connecting Muslim and non-Muslim societies ever more intimately, and yet, at the same time, misunderstandings between those worlds are becoming an increasingly dangerous threat...I believe strongly that art and culture can have a profound impact in healing misunderstanding and in fostering trust, even across great divides."

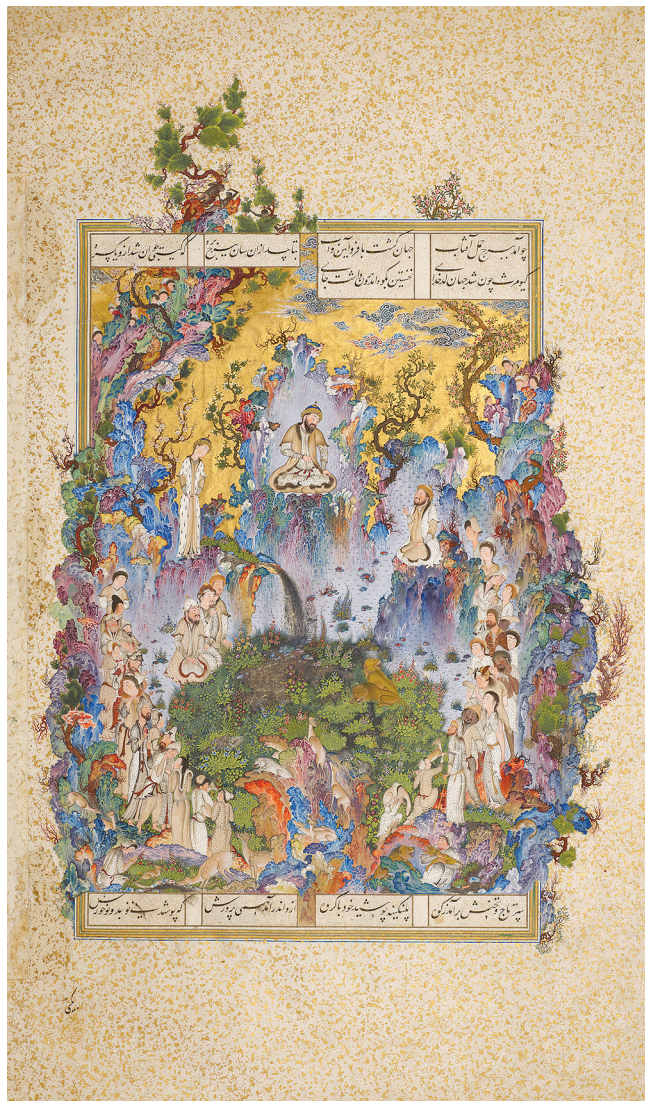
Lofty ambitions—well beyond a more typical goal of getting people through the doors and teaching them a thing or two. But I couldn't imagine how a museum goes about such a task. So I decided to find out.

First, I took a tour. The dozen or so in my group were ethnically diverse—not surprising, given that Toronto is by several measures the most multicultural

The new Aga Khan Museum in Toronto has gained attention for its stunning architecture and its collection showing cross-cultural connections.



GARY OTTE PHOTOGRAPHY



city in the world. Our 20-something guide seemed well-trained in the museum's mission: Through the collection of artwork, manuscripts, musical instruments and even scientific tools, he showed how the transfer of art and knowledge forged connections between Muslim and other civilizations. The objects originate from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, from an area stretching from Spain to China.

When our guide didn't know the answer to a question, people from the group stepped up to share their knowledge. When someone asked whether there are differences in the Koran used by Sunni and Shia Muslims (the factions battling in the Middle East), someone in the group explained that the book is the

same for all branches of the Muslim faith.

If the museum is trying to create dialogue, it was starting right here in our little tour group.

As our guide pointed out particular objects, he described the influence the object had on other civilizations and vice versa. *The Canon of Medicine*, for example, by Iranian scholar Ibn Sina fostered the exchange of scientific knowledge. The encyclopedia, from the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century, brought together medical knowledge from Muslim, Greco-Roman and Chinese societies. By the 13<sup>th</sup> century, it had been translated into Latin and was used to teach medicine in European universities well into the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

And Arabic inscriptions on a

porcelain basin made in Jingdezhen, China, show the 16<sup>th</sup>-century contact between China and the Muslim world. We also saw the western influence on Muslim art in a pair of portraits of Safavid nobles from 17<sup>th</sup>-century Iran. The use of oil on canvas in the painting and the style of linear perspective demonstrate the transfer of European knowledge from the West to the East.

The museum doesn't use the term "Islamic art." Instead, it's "art from Muslim civilizations," according to Patricia Bentley, the museum's education consultant. That's because the objects don't represent a single, monolithic culture but instead are "very diverse, covering vast geographies and histories of humanity," she explained.

Another myth to dispel is the idea that figures can't be portrayed. Bentley said most people are surprised to see so many human figures in the art.

"In fact, figuration is taken to a high level in secular objects," she noted. "If we do our job right, they'll come out saying, 'Boy, I never knew there were so many stories.'"

Later, using an audio and photo guide, I could zoom in to see the magnificent detail that's often not visible to the naked eye. A map and timeline reinforced the message of connection and shared ideas.

When I visited, the Aga Khan Museum was too new to have much information about the types of people visiting. "But it seems diverse," Bentley said. "I've observed young, old and kids," she said, adding with a smile, "I've certainly noticed a variety of footwear—

from sneakers to high heels to Birkenstocks."

A week later, I returned to talk with more visitors for their takes on the museum.

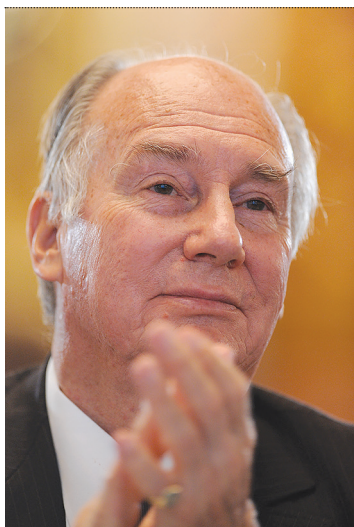
Judy Nisenholt of Toronto described herself and her friend Anna Maria Grossi as "culture buffs." Grossi was born in Italy but lives in Toronto and is particularly interested in the museum "because of the big influence Islamic civilizations have had on Italy. For example, they had paper in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century—that's much earlier than in Italy. They were a very advanced civilization. We learned a lot from what they brought to Europe."

Both Nisenholt and Grossi said they thought the museum could achieve its goals. "If you don't have any idea about Islamic culture, or even if you have preconceived ideas, the museum can change your mind," Grossi said.

Amal Karim, a Sunni Muslim from New Jersey, was visiting the museum with her brother, who lives in Toronto. When I asked what she thought of the museum's mission, she smiled and said, "That's interesting. When we walked in, I commented that I hope it will remind people there's more to Muslim civilization than terrorists. Hopefully people will realize there's thousands of years of art, and history and poetry."

The Aga Khan staff might cringe at Karim's blunt words. And yet, her reaction is, essentially, what the museum seeks. One visitor at a time.

*Ingrid Sapona is a Toronto-based writer.*



## The man behind the museum

The 78-year-old, Swiss-born Aga Khan is the 49<sup>th</sup> hereditary Imam of the Shia Ismaili Muslims, numbering 15 million worldwide. In 2010 he was awarded honorary Canadian citizenship, something only five others hold. According to Prime Minister Stephen Harper, the honor was in recognition of his leadership in promoting development, pluralism and tolerance around the world.

The Aga Khan carries out many of his secular responsibilities through the Aga Khan Development Network, an international, nondenominational organization employing about 80,000 people in 30 countries in the fields of health care, education, economic development and more. The Development Network established the museum.



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The expansive museum will also host music, dance and film events.

## Planning a visit

The museum is open from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesdays through Sundays (until 8 p.m. on Thursdays). Check the website ([agakhanmuseum.org](http://agakhanmuseum.org)) for music, dance and film events as well as information on garden-design tours of the grounds.

77 Wynford Drive, Toronto;  
(416) 646-4677.

## Building as art

The original plan was to build the museum in London, but when the sale of land there fell through, the Aga Khan chose Toronto. As one Toronto columnist put it, London's loss was Toronto's gain.

The Aga Khan hired two world-famous architects. Pritzker Prize winner Fumihiko Maki from Japan designed the museum, and Charles Correa of India designed the adjacent Ismaili Centre, Toronto, as an Ismaili community. The garden was designed by landscape architect Vladimir Djurovic of Lebanon.

The result is a stunning cultural oasis.



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